YUU MIYAZAKI

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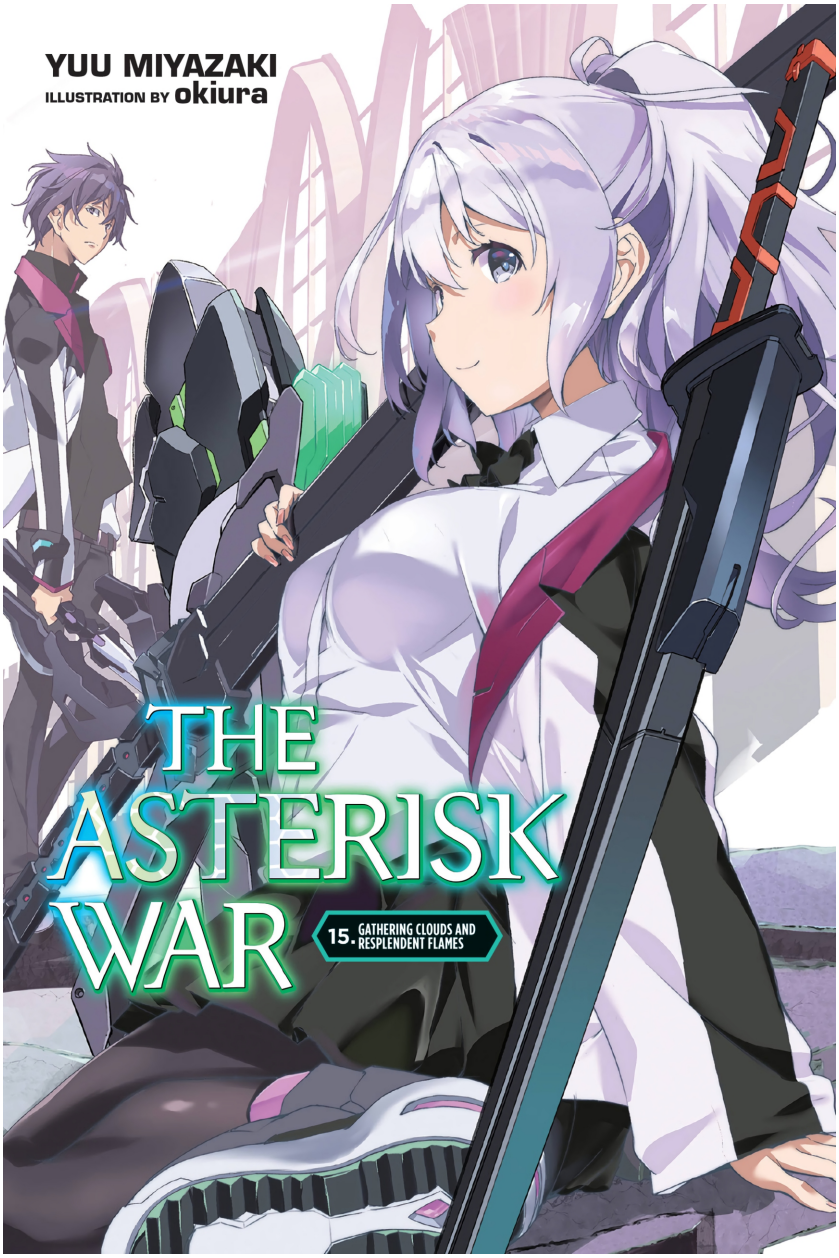

THE ASTERISK WAR

15. GATHERING CLOUDS AND RESPLENDENT FLAMES

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15. GATHERING CLOUDS AND RESPLENDENT FLAMES

YUU MIYAZAKI

ILLUSTRATION BY okiura

Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld
Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld
"IF YOU PLAN TO STOP ME, THEN COME, AYATO. I'M GOING ALL OUT."
Ayato Amagiri
Ayato Amagiri
"...IF THAT'S HOW YOU WANT TO DO IT."

Ayato Amagiri

THE ASTERISK WAR

15. GATHERING CLOUDS AND RESPLENDENT FLAMES

YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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THE ASTERISK WAR, Vol. 15
YUU MIYAZAKI

Translation by Haydn Trowell
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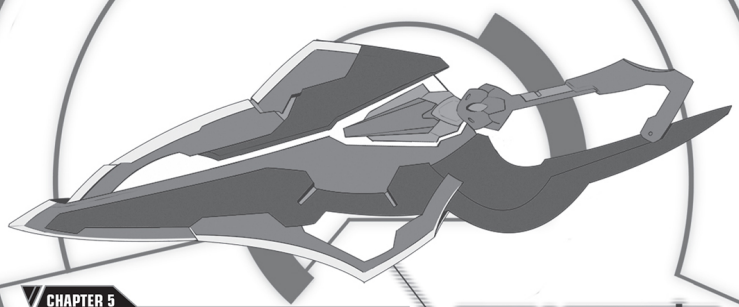

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CHAPTER 1
INTRICATE PREPARATIONS

"Thank you."

At the sight of a woman bowing her head as she exited the hospital room, Julis ducked down a nearby corridor to conceal herself.

What's Ayato's sister doing here…?

She carefully peered back the way she had come from, watching as the woman dressed in the Asterisk police uniform, Haruka Amagiri, headed for the elevator in the opposite direction. It wasn't as if Julis had done anything wrong, but she couldn't shake the feeling that if they were to come face-to-face, their encounter would be an incredibly awkward one. Things had been uncomfortable between her and the others for a while now.

There were a great many examination rooms in this part of the building, but the one Haruka had just left was run by the hospital's director, Jan Korbel. He had an extremely busy schedule, and it was rare for him to deal directly with everyday sicknesses or injuries. Which meant…

"Why, if it isn't Julis!"

"Gah?!"

She leaped backward at the sound of a voice right next to her.

The schoolgirl turned around to find Haruka's carefree smile. "I felt someone watching, so I thought I'd see who it was."

Julis thought she had made her presence all but invisible, but Haruka was Ayato's sister, after all. Her senses were sharp.

"Sorry… It's been a while," she said, greeting her with a reluctant nod.

“Same here. What brings you…? Ah yes, your arm.”

Julis pressed her left hand against the simple cast that encased her right arm. This was the cost of her victory against Xiaohui Wu in the fifth round of the Lindvolus.

Meteoric engineering had brought many advances to the field of medicine, but there was still no way to immediately heal a broken bone—apart from relying on the abilities of a healer, that was. Nonetheless, with the right medicine, it was possible to dull the pain so that it wouldn’t interfere with her next match. That was why she had come here.

“Are you okay…? I guess not. But you’ve won your next match by default, right?”

“Yes, fortunately.”

“In that case, your next one will be—” Haruka fell silent, suddenly realizing the answer.

Right. Her next match would be against either Ayato or Fuyuka Umenokouji, who were about to face off against each other shortly.

Fuyuka was strong—or more precisely, her strength lay in the *shikigami* that she summoned, Gigoku. That power, which had defeated Noelle Messmer of Saint Gallardworth Academy, was probably on par with Xiaohui Wu’s. And neither Fuyuka nor that creature had yet to show their full hand. Out of the seven contestants left standing, she was undoubtedly the most unpredictable.

But even so, Julis firmly believed that her next opponent would be Ayato.

No matter how strong the challenger, Ayato had overcome them all. At least when it came to the Festa.

And that was why this was so difficult for her.

At this rate, he would end up—

“Say, Julis. Could I borrow you for a minute?”

“…Huh?”

Haruka’s soft voice brought her back to her senses.

“I should probably tell you everything I can.”

Unsure how to reply, Julis allowed Haruka to guide her to a sofa in a nearby resting area.

“All right. I can’t share anything myself, though.” She wanted to get that out of the way up front.

Haruka, however, simply nodded along, her warm smile never wavering. “That’s fine. There’s something I ought to tell you, that’s

all.”

They sat down on the sofa. Soft winter sunlight poured in through the window. Outside was a courtyard lined with small evergreen trees, their leaves undulating in the wind. It was a peaceful, calm, and somehow lonely sight.

“Julis, how much has Ayato told you?”

“…That if he doesn’t win the tournament, then your life will be in danger.”

“Ah… I was afraid that might be the case,” Haruka said with an awkward laugh. “So he hasn’t given you any details?”

“I guess he was worried about dragging me into it.”

He had made that painfully obvious.

Ayato was fighting against something huge, that she knew. If she could, she wanted to be there to help him win that battle.

But right now, there was another war she had to wage, one she had to put above everything else. It was a contest only she could win. She couldn’t give up, no matter what.

“…I see. So you’re in a similar situation.” Haruka let out a slight sigh before turning back to Julis with a smile. “In that case, even if you do go up against Ayato, you’ve still got to put everything you have into beating him.”

“That’s—” she began before biting her tongue. She couldn’t talk back to someone whose life was on the line.

“It’s not like I’ll die right away if Ayato doesn’t win… At least I don’t think I will.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Um… Julis, how much do you know about Lamina Mortis?”

“He’s the one who attacked Ayato the day before the championship match of the Gryps, right? With the Raksha-Nada.”

If Ernest Fairclough hadn’t fought alongside Ayato back then, they probably wouldn’t have been able to hold him off. There was no mistaking that he possessed a terrifying, immeasurable power.

“There’s a fragment of that Raksha-Nada inside me, right around here,” Haruka said, holding a hand to her abdomen.

“What?!” Julis’s eyes opened wide in shock.

It was an extraordinary claim, but she had no reason to doubt her.

Haruka’s skills and abilities were on par with Ayato’s. No ordinary person would be able to use her life as a bargaining chip to blackmail Ayato.

Lamina Mortis, however, was another story.

And the Raksha-Nada was capable of being broken down into countless smaller pieces to attack from multiple directions…

“It’s a tiny fragment. But it stands to reason that it’s the smallest Lamina Mortis can control…right?” Haruka shrugged her shoulders, knowing that Julis would understand.

And she did. No matter how small the fragment was, as part of the blade of an Orga Lux, it would be able to destroy the human body with ease. Lamina Mortis could tear her internal organs to shreds on a whim. There could be no surviving that.

At that moment, Julis was struck with an idea.

“But in that case…couldn’t you use the Ser Veresta to burn that fragment away?”

Since the blade of any Lux was created out of mana, it could be extinguished if it was crushed into a form beyond what its user could control. And the principle applied just as well to Orga Luxes. No matter how many pieces the Raksha-Nada could be divided into, if they weren’t big enough for its wielder to manipulate, they would cease to exist.

On top of that, Haruka and the Ser Veresta had even been able to burn through alterations made to her memories. That being the case, it shouldn’t be impossible for her to destroy a piece of the Raksha-Nada, too.

Haruka, however, shook her head sadly. “The fragment only comes into being when Lamina Mortis activates the Raksha-Nada. In other words, it doesn’t exist until then. Even the Ser Veresta can’t destroy something that isn’t there.”

“…I see.”

As frustrating as it was, that did make sense.

Nonetheless, as there could be no doubt that the fragment was tied not to any fixed spatial coordinates but to Haruka’s body itself, there was still a chance it could be forcibly removed. If a Strega or a Dante were to—

No.

Julis, a Strega herself, stopped there, realizing her error:

It wouldn’t work.

The Raksha-Nada was an Orga Lux. No Strega or Dante would be able to match that. If she were to redefine from the outside that contradictory state in which something that didn’t exist still existed, then…

“But you know, there *is* a limit to the Raksha-Nada’s power,” Haruka said calmly, interrupting Julis’s thoughts. “It may have the widest range among the Four Colored Runeswords, but at most, it only works at a few dozen yards. So as long as I stay out of that range, I should be safe. Like if I stayed in one of the special rooms here.”

“Is that what you were doing…?”

“Yep. I came to talk it over with Director Korbel. Given the situation, he’s happy to help. So if Ayato doesn’t manage to take the crown, I’ll come here.”

“…” Julis was speechless.

It was true that the hospital had a special underground ward that was off-limits to visitors. But that meant Haruka wouldn’t be able to leave. It would be a shame to have to come back here, giving up her freedom again after finally waking up from her long sleep. And on top of that, there was no telling whether Lamina Mortis might somehow manage to bypass the hospital’s security. After all, he had already attacked Ayato in one of the courtyards outside.

But still…Julis had to admit that Haruka's resolve gave her a sense of relief.

Even if it was all a deception.

"Well, I need to get back to work," Haruka said, rising to her feet and patting Julis on the shoulder. "I can't say I'm not worried, but I know you're a kind person, Julis, and Ayato's in your thoughts, too. I hope I've been able to make it a bit easier for you."

"…Why?" Julis asked, staring up at her gentle face. "Ayato is the most important person in the world to you, right? If I end up facing him, I'll be his enemy. So why would you…?"

"Of course, Ayato is more precious to me than anything. I'd risk my life for him. But he's important to you, too, right?"

Those words carved mercilessly through Julis's heart.

"And I'm sure Ayato feels the same way about you. So as his sister, I want to do what I can to help. For him and for you. That's all." Haruka finished with a gentle wave as she turned to leave.

"…She's strong, that's for sure," Julis murmured.

Haruka was gentle, kind, and stern—to Julis, to Ayato, and even to herself.

I don't want to make her suffer…but I have to do what I can.

Julis rose to her feet with newfound resolution, just as her mobile sounded with an incoming message.

As she glanced at the screen, her brow furrowed in suspicion.

"…What on earth?"

❄

"I'm back," Haruka said with a formal salute as she entered the captain's room at Stjarnagarm's headquarters.

Helga Lindwall, sitting at her desk with multiple air-windows open in front of her, glanced up for a split second before turning back to her work. "Excellent. How did it go? Did you get permission?"

"Yes, Director Korbel is happy to cooperate. He'll leave one of their special rooms free. Although he did want to know more about the situation."

"Well, he probably feels like he owes you something after he wasn't able to wake you up for so long. I didn't think he would

refuse our request, even if we do withhold some of the details…" Helga's fingers tapped restlessly at the keyboard as she continued. "In any event, we'll have you stand by at the hospital as soon as you're ready. You shouldn't have to wait too long. Only until we pin down the whereabouts of Lamina Mortis—or Madiath Mesa, rather."

At this, Haruka found herself leaning forward. "Has there been any progress?"

Helga's typing finally came to a stop. She grinned broadly and opened another air-window for Haruka to see.

"Just as you suspected. Looking back over the details of the last incident was the right call."

Displayed in the air-window was a report from the investigation into the accident that had destroyed the Space Research and Development Agency's new rocket engine design several years back. Haruka had already read it.

The report determined that the cause of the incident was a problem in the new engine, with the resulting explosion scattering its pieces in a wide area over the sea. Only small parts of it had been recovered. It was clear, however, that the conclusions were poorly substantiated. It was obvious that the writers of the report—or people connected to them—had sought to draw the curtain on the investigation as quickly as possible, no matter how brazenly inadequate their efforts.

"And this… This is from Minato Wakamiya. It's her father's diary." Helga pointed to a worn paper-bound diary, a rare sight in the modern age.

When she opened it, Haruka found it filled with meticulously tidy entries.

"September 3. Sunny. Took a nighttime stroll along the coast with my daughter. The usual question. The usual answer. The essence of a dream. Will she follow it one day?"

They were short, straightforward, almost clinical sentences.

It was more like a collection of notes than a diary. The entries for some days noted no more than the date and the weather; the author, Minato's father, looked to have recorded only those things that caught his attention.

Haruka and Ayato had first learned about the diary the other day when they had asked Minato about the incident. "I don't really remember much about it, but… Ah! I still have my dad's diary!"

Minato had announced, bringing it out for them.

"Minato treasures this as a memory of her father," Haruka murmured.

"He must have been very important to her," Helga agreed.

They had been looking for a way—any possible way—to corner Madiath for some time. There was no doubting that, under his guise as Lamina Mortis, he and the other members of his Golden Bough Alliance were involved in all kinds of criminal activities. But no matter which line of inquiry they took, those pursuing him had yet to find any definitive evidence. With the Varda-Vaos, an Orga Lux with the ability of mental interference, Madiath and his associates were capable of covering up practically everything they did.

And while there may have been enough evidence to arrest Lamina Mortis for kidnapping Haruka and attacking Ayato, so long as they couldn't prove that Lamina Mortis and Madiath Mesa were one and the same, it would be difficult to make a move. What they needed was proof of crimes that Madiath had committed using his own identity.

And so Haruka had turned her attention to his past.

They had already learned secondhand of the Varda-Vaos's abilities through Claudia's mother, Isabella. According to her, the only person the Orga Lux was capable of taking complete control over was its user—whose body it effectively usurped. When it came to altering or deleting the memories of others, whether Genestella or not, it required considerable time to fully complete its task.

On top of that, especially when it came to Genestellas, who were naturally more resistant to mental interference than regular people, it was difficult for the Varda-Vaos to completely rewrite their personalities. Any changes had to be in line with their existing individual traits and qualities.

In other words, even the Varda-Vaos couldn't mass-produce blind loyalty. At best, it could have only increased the number of its followers under its control gradually, over a great deal of time.

What that meant was the further back you looked into the past, the smaller the number of people involved in covering up the activities of Madiath and his associates was. It wasn't clear how long the Golden Bough Alliance had been operating, but from what Haruka had inferred from Madiath, his motives bore some deep connection to her mother.

That being the case, it must have begun no more than maybe

twenty years ago—meaning there were still plenty of potential avenues to explore. Moreover, Madiath was an employee of Galaxy, at least on paper, so there should still have been considerable data on him in the foundation's database.

Accessing that data, however, wouldn't be an easy task.

As chairman of the Festa Executive Committee, he was an extremely talented and diligent individual, simultaneously taking on a great and diverse range of tasks. There wasn't time to scrutinize each and every one of them. On top of that, there were a great many instances where the data seemed to have been tampered with. Most likely he had collaborators inside Galaxy itself.

"At the very least, I wanted to link that incident to him somehow…," Helga murmured.

"Ah, that reminds me," Haruka began. "Ayato—I mean, my brother—he had a thought, or maybe a piece of advice…"

"By the way, Haruka, when Lamina Mortis kidnapped you, he mentioned the incident with the rocket, right?"

Haruka had gone to congratulate Ayato after his fourth-round Lindvolus match, when he broached the topic out of the blue.

That incident was what had resulted in her going into her long sleep. Lamina Mortis and the others had attempted to bring about a second Invertia by sending one of their associates to the moon to awaken a slumbering mass of urm-manadite, though Haruka had managed to thwart their plan with only moments to spare. The rocket they had prepared used the engine stolen from the Space Research and Development Agency. No doubt the incident involving the engine explosion was their work, too.

"The thing is, my opponent seems to be connected to it all…"

And so Ayato led her to that person—to Minato. Haruka couldn't conceal her pride at his astuteness for having connected the dots.

"I see. I'll have to thank him myself… Well then, so long as you're looking at the diary, turn to the tenth of February, back in '61."

"February 10. Rain. Had an inspection by the IEF. There was a Genestella in the inspection team. Asked a lot of questions. I thought I recognized him, and it turned out he won the Phoenix Tournament a few years back. He was certainly well-mannered and enthusiastic about the work, but something struck me as off. I suppose it takes a certain kind of person to survive at an IEF, though."

“This man…that’s Madiath Mesa, right?”

“It sounds that way. They may not have been many in number, but there *were* a few Genestella working for the IEFs ten years ago. Only Madiath Mesa was a champion of the Phoenix, though,” Helga responded, rubbing her chin with her hand. “Galaxy played a hand in financing the manned lunar mission. It isn’t unusual that they would want to keep an eye on it. What *is* unusual is Madiath Mesa’s involvement.”

“Why is that?”

“Madiath’s wish after winning the Festa was to be made part of the Executive Committee, and so he was. The Executive Committee is comprised of representatives from each of the integrated enterprise foundations, and so as part of that process, he also became an executive at Galaxy—on paper anyway. That arrangement is little more than a formality. I very much doubt he would be involved in any substantial work. So anything that he’s officially involved in should be related to the Festa in some way.”

Haruka found herself nodding along in realization.

Helga’s many years protecting and keeping order inside Asterisk had given her a keen understanding of the dynamics between the foundations.

The main threat constantly facing Asterisk wasn’t quarrels between students or the usual forms of crime but rather the six giant, devouring monsters that were those organizations, constantly fighting among themselves for influence and power.

“So does the manned lunar mission have any connection to the Festa…?”

“That’s just it. Strictly speaking, one private company did. But have a look at this.” Helga entered a command into her terminal, opening an air-window displaying the official site of a company called PVA Enterprises.

“So they develop shock-absorbing materials…,” Haruka said as she glanced over it. “And they’re part of Galaxy.”

“According to our data from Galaxy, Madiath Mesa was once an external director at this PVA Enterprises.”

“…What does that mean?” Haruka couldn’t understand the connection.

“You’ve heard that the Festa stages were renovated before the last Gryps, I assume? They were equipped with a new system using a protective gel to keep the audience out of harm’s reach. Naturally,

that wasn't the work of Allekant's research alone. Each of the foundations had a number of subsidiaries involved in the project, all of them working with the Executive Committee. PVA Enterprises was one of them."

The Festa venues had been renovated during Haruka's long sleep, so she had only learned about the changes during the present Lindvolus. It was clear, however, that the new system was much more advanced than the previous one.

"The plan to improve the stages was drafted before the incident with the rocket engine. But the one who recommended PVA Enterprises was Madiath Mesa himself. Working on the Festa's protective systems is a huge undertaking for any company. And while PVA Enterprises may be large today, back then they were a rather small company and didn't have much to show for their technical expertise. They certainly weren't the kind of business that would normally be contracted to participate in that kind of project."

So that was it.

"In other words…corruption?"

"Well, that alone isn't all that unusual. It's certainly better for appearances to offer remuneration in the form of an official project rather than money under the table. That in and of itself isn't illegal. I don't know who approached whom, but Madiath certainly would have been a boon to PVA Enterprises' operations. After all, he was still in his twenties, and he hadn't had to go through a mental adjustment program like most IEF executives."

"But… He doesn't seem like the kind of person who would take on a job like that for just the money."

Haruka may not have been able to comprehend or sympathize with his actions, but she understood him well enough to know he was driven by a strong, unwavering will that, for better or for worse, would bend for nothing and no one.

Helga nodded. "I agree. Most likely his real goal was to establish a foothold."

"A foothold…?"

"Soon after he became an external director there, PVA Enterprises joined the lunar surface mission partway into the project. If he had requested it of them in exchange for the Festa project, they wouldn't have been able to refuse."

"Oh! So what you're saying is…?"

If it had been in his capacity as a representative of a company

that also happened to be taking part in the Festa's next-gen protection system, he would have had a valid pretense to visit the site. And that would have given him a chance to insert a technician brainwashed by the Varda-Vaos, or maybe even to bring the Varda-Vaos itself with him.

"This is, however, merely speculation. I doubt we'll find any hard evidence. That said…luckily, some of the data remains. Look at me, feeling grateful to Galaxy for once." Helga let out a bitter laugh as she switched to another air-window.

"These are…financial statements?"

"A world ruled by the IEFs means an economy ruled by the IEFs. Not even he can hide from that," Helga said, a sharp glint to her eyes. "We might have only reached the tip of your tail, Madiath Mesa…but we've caught you now."

*

The place Orphelia had called Julis to was the same corner of the redevelopment area as last time.

It was past sunset. Beneath a sky peppered with clouds, row upon row of derelict buildings were lit only by the hazy glow of the moon. The rest of Asterisk may have been filled with towering skyscrapers brilliantly illuminated for all the world to see, but here, in this ruin on the verge of collapse, everything was dull and muted.

With a flick of her finger, a flame appeared over Julis's shoulder to illuminate her surroundings.

"I'm here, Orphelia. What did you want?" she called out into the darkness, but there was no response.

The message she received had been sent by none other than Orphelia Landlufen. All it contained was a time and a location.

Julis had had no contact with her since they had last met here on that night during the school fair. Given Orphelia's personality, she hadn't expected to see her again until they came face-to-face during the Lindvolus. But having been contacted out of the blue like this, she couldn't not come.

And at that very moment—

"Wha—?!"

—out of nowhere, a sudden burst of light came tearing through the darkness.

Julis spun around to dodge it, only to find the end of a giant hammer-shaped Lux hurtling toward her from behind.

"Augh—!"

She dived into a forward roll to escape, but the hammer followed in pursuit, as if the darkness itself were wielding it.

There's four…no, five of them. They've got me completely surrounded… But more importantly, that light…!

She hadn't let her guard down, so her assailant must have possessed considerable abilities to surround her like this.

"Bloom!" she cried out, and the flame she had been using as a lantern swelled enormously, casting a dazzling light over her surroundings.

"Ardy…?!"

Standing around her were five autonomous puppets of the type she had only narrowly defeated in the championship match of the Phoenix.

But Julis soon realized she was facing something completely different. These autonomous puppets may have been built to a similar design, but the real thing had a much more dangerous presence, greater composure, and an intense sense of self.

Nonetheless, these autonomous puppets had launched an unbelievably efficient, coordinated attack.

"Phew…!"

Having staved off their assault, Julis raised her arm into the air, letting it fall in the direction of the nearby ruins.

"Burst into bloom—*Amaryllis!*"

"Tch!"

A split second before the fireball exploded, a figure came hurtling out of the darkness.

"An ambush doesn't exactly live up to Gallardworth's ethos," Julis called out.

The figure, illuminated now by the explosion still raging behind her, was that of Percival Gardner. The last time Julis had seen her was during the championship match at the Gryps, where her own Team Enfield had defeated Percival's Team Lancelot.

She gave off a very different impression now, though, garbed not in the uniform of Saint Gallardworth Academy but in a black military-style outfit. There was no mistaking, however, the glow of the Holy Grail, her Orga Lux, known as the Amalthean Goat.

"…I'm afraid I'm no longer affiliated with Gallardworth,"

Percival answered expressionlessly.

"Oh? Looks like that hasn't stopped you from holding onto the Holy Grail." Julis snorted before thrusting her hand onto the ground. "Burst into bloom—*Ranunculus!*"

A ferocious burst of heat radiated around her, forcing the Ardy-like puppets to fall back to escape its path.

Maintaining her guard against them, Julis brushed back her hair, fixing Percival with a fiery glare. "It's hard to imagine Gallardworth joining hands with Allekant to come after me. Which means…you're working for someone else, I presume?"

"I'm not here to answer your questions. I'm here to eliminate you."

With that, Percival raised her left hand into the air, the Holy Grail rising up behind her and rotating toward Julis. But it looked like the Orga Lux wasn't yet fully charged. The Amalthean Goat worked by releasing a burst of light that robbed anyone it touched of consciousness. If it reached its target, there was no defending against it. Fortunately, though, it couldn't be used at rapid intervals.

"Whatever. I'm not really interested in why you're here or what you're hoping to accomplish. Just tell me…did Orphelia send you?"

"…"

Percival remained silent. It looked like she had no intention of talking.

"I see. In that case, I'll have to force the answer out of you…!"

A powerful burst of mana erupted into flames around her.

The Ardy-like puppets braced themselves with their hammers, while Percival readied a pistol-shaped Lux.

That was when—

"If that's what it's come to, I hope you won't mind if we join you? I've got some questions of my own."

—a voice carried through the ruins, a shadow appearing almost directly between Julis and Percival.

Perhaps judging it to be an enemy, the nearest puppet rushed toward it—only to be cut clean in half by the flicker of a sword gleaming through the dark.

"You took out a Valiant in one shot…?" Percival murmured in disbelief.

By the sound of it, by *Valiant* she meant the puppets.

"This isn't particularly becoming of you, Agrestia."

Emerging from the shadows, his expression dumbfounded, was a golden-haired youth. The pure white blade in his hand was unmistakably the Lei-Glems, one of the Four Colored Runeswords alongside Ayato's Ser Veresta.

He wasn't alone. Behind him stood a young woman, her long bangs almost covering her eyes.

"Claíomh Solais? And Perceforêt…?"

Julis herself had been taken by surprise by the sudden appearance of the pair, but Percival looked to be even more uneasy. There was no missing the momentary crack in her composure.

"…Why are you here?" There was a faint tremor to her cold, quiet voice.

"You're well aware of Sinodomius's information-gathering expertise, Percival. I know you've gotten caught up in some bad business," the young man said—Saint Gallardworth Academy's Student Council President Elliot Forster—as he returned the Lei-Glems to the holder at his waist. "Please come back to the school with me, Percival. We can deal with everything else then. Don't worry, there's still time to put all this behind us."

"R-right…! E-everyone's worried about you! Ernest and Laetitia and…!"

"…Ah." Facing Elliot, Percival let out a deep sigh, shaking her head. "How can you still think that…? Yes, yes, I get it. Gallardworth is a wonderful school. Everyone is so kind there, so noble. It's such a welcoming and easy place to be… That's precisely why I can't stand it anymore. That place has stunted me. I've grown rusty. And because of that, I can't even face *them*… I have to redeem myself. But to do that, I need to be their gun." She paused there, her voice becoming oddly calmer with each passing second. As cold as ice, as lifeless as steel. "I'm fulfilling my purpose now. In the hands of a perfect user, I don't need to think about anything. All I need to do is carry out my function as a weapon. That is my atonement."

As she finished speaking, she held out her left hand, sending a wave of brilliant light coursing from the Amalthean Goat.

Julis threw herself to the ground. "I don't really know what's going on here, but if you've got a problem within your own ranks, can't you find somewhere else to work it out?!" she cried.

"And we came here to help you!" Elliot, having similarly dropped to the floor, called back.

“Don’t patronize me! If you’re here for Agrestia—”

But at that moment, the Valiants burst through the stream of light in a coordinated assault. The puppets, of course, were immune to the Orga Lux’s abilities.

Julis immediately began to raise her right hand to deploy one of her defensive techniques, but the fracture sent a burning pain through her arm, delaying her reaction.

Damn…!

The nearest Valiant brought its hammer down above her—and then, for some reason, stopped in its tracks.

Julis stared back in disbelief, only now noticing that the puppet was enveloped in a web of thorns that was locking up its joints. And it wasn’t just that one unit. The thorns covered the whole immediate area, holding each of the remaining Valiants down.

“A-are you okay…?”

It went without saying that it was Noelle Messmer, alias Perceforêt, who was behind this.

“I can see why you did so well in the Lindvolus. That’s an impressive ability. Thanks.”

“N-not at all, I just…”

Unlike Elliot, Noelle looked to have a meek personality. Her cheeks turning crimson, she stared down at her feet.

Meanwhile, his body lowered, Elliot dashed through the ruins.

With four quick flashes of the Lei-Glems, the four remaining Valiants came crashing to the ground.

Like Ardy, the puppets all seemed to be equipped with defensive shields, but they were no use against this opponent. The Lei-Glems was designed to cut through only its intended target and to pass effortlessly through anything else. It was impossible to defend against.

“Now then, let’s go home, Percival. If you resist, I’ll have to exercise my authority as student council president,” Elliot said, pointing the tip of his Orga Lux toward her.

His eyes positively gleamed with determination.

Percival, on the other hand, hid her face in her hand, muttering something under her breath.

“It’s always the same with you. Why are you always getting in my way…? It’s no good, no good. I can’t destroy her. I can’t carry out my orders. I can’t redeem myself. And that means…”

Percival’s eyes clouded over, her gaze losing its focus.

At that moment, the Amalthean Goat, floating in the air behind her, started to lose its shape. It began to elongate, like a cup lying on its side, stretching long and wide as light poured out, engulfing the thorns strewn around it.

“No!” Elliot’s eyes had opened wide in shock. “The Holy Grail’s second form?! But that’s…!”

A terrible chill coursed down Julis’s spine.

This was bad. Whatever it was, her intuition told her the situation had suddenly become far more dangerous.

But while her instincts were sounding in alarm, she had no idea how to respond.

There’s no way I can get past that light…! Should I fall back? But if I do that…

In the meantime, the Holy Grail had transformed into a spear. The space around it was engulfed in a dazzling light, no doubt just as potent at knocking its target out cold as it was before.

Percival raised her left hand into the air, her fingers tightening around it, when—

“Good grief. You make a few modifications and then this happens…,” came yet another voice as a new figure grabbed her arm.

As soon as the hooded, robed woman touched her arm, Percival fell to the ground as if losing consciousness.

“It won’t do to use the Holy Grail here. If handled poorly, it could end up damaging the city. I don’t want any unnecessary trouble.”

Not only Julis but Elliot and Noelle kept their gazes fixed on the woman. She had practically appeared out of thin air.

“Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld,” the woman called out to her as she lifted Percival over her shoulder. “We’re out of time. If Gallardworth’s intelligence network has caught on to us, there can be no more fooling around. You needn’t hold your silence any longer. But be sure to honor your agreement with Orphelia. If you break your word…”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. If I was going to talk, I would have done it a long time ago. I don’t know who you are, but are you with Orphelia? And what exactly are *you* doing? I expect an answer!”

The woman, however, turned her back on Julis, ignoring her defiant glare. “You’re too much for even us to handle. Unpredictable when you feign obedience. Rushing into action when you should keep your head down. You creatures are impossible to control. Human nature is beyond comprehension.” And with that, the woman vanished, Percival in tow.

The next moment, the bodies of the remaining Valiants exploded, engulfing the ruins in flames.

“Ugh! Destroying the evidence…!”

But it was too late to do anything about it now.

As Julis turned to leave, Elliot thrust the tip of the Lei-Glems toward her.

“Hold on a moment, if you would. I have questions for you, too.”

“I’m afraid I can’t break my silence. Not that I’m going to stop you from looking into things yourself.”

“Not so fast!” Elliot moved to block her path, his voice turning dark. It didn’t look like he was about to relent. “Who was that woman in the robe? No, first things first, what did Gardner want with you? And Orphelia… I don’t suppose you mean Orphelia Landlufen? What does *she* have to do with this…?!”

Julis shook her head slightly. “I’d like to know the answers to those questions just as much as you do. I suppose you’re acting on information from your esteemed Sinodomius?”

“That’s…” At this, Elliot paused for a moment, averting his gaze. “That was mostly a bluff. Yes, Sinodomius managed to locate her, but that was truly a coincidence. She just happened to get caught up in the usual information gathering. We don’t know anything about the group backing her,” he admitted grudgingly, biting his lip.

“You’re telling me that you, a student council president, barged into this mess based on nothing more than that?” Julis asked incredulously.

Elliot let out a self-deprecating chuckle. “I’ve been branded pretty much useless as student council president anyway. This is the least I could do.”

That reminded her. Julis had heard that Elliot received a lot of criticism from both within Gallardworth and from elsewhere over what had happened with the Black Knight. And the pressure of being Ernest Fairclough’s successor was no doubt immense.

“Th-that’s not true! You came here because you’re worried about Percival! You’ve kept up the story about her having an official leave of absence, and you said you wanted to work everything out with her behind closed doors, to resolve it all as easily as possible! And if…if I hadn’t insisted on joining you, you would have come here all by yourself!” Noelle’s face had turned bright red.

“That, too, was a reckless course of action…”

No doubt, Julis thought, Sinodomius was already monitoring them.

It sounded as if Elliot had merely inherited the Runesword and had yet to truly fill the shoes of the student council president role. It was hard to say if he was really suited to the position, but his blind sense of justice and honesty looked genuine.

Huh…? Hold on, the Runesword…?

At that moment, a piece of the puzzle clicked into place inside her mind.

If she was right, she might just have a solution.

“Very well. I’ll tell you what I know.”

If, as Orphelia liked to claim, there was such a thing in this world as fate, then it was nothing short of destiny that had brought them together like this now.

“R-really?!” Noelle beamed, her eyes sparkling.

“Why the sudden change of heart…?” Elliot asked dubiously.

Julis raised two fingers. “But I have two conditions. First, I’ll tell you once the Lindvolus is over. I’ve still got a way to go. I don’t want any distractions.”

Her promise with Orphelia would be meaningless after the conclusion of the finals. There would be no problem revealing everything once the tournament was over.

“…And the other one?” Elliot, no doubt suspecting that she would make some unreasonable request, looked visibly nervous.

“I want you to go to the rescue of a princess in need. That’s what knights do, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER 2
THE QUARTERFINALS I

Fuyuka Umenokouji, sitting across from her master, Xinglou Fan, at the moon-viewing platform on the highest floor of Jie Long Seventh Institute's Hall of the Yellow Dragon, drained her cup.

Despite appearances, they weren't sharing wine. According to Xinglou, it was an elixir known as *yaojintang*, a sparkling golden liquid, mellow and with a subtle sweetness.

"How unusual, the master inviting her student to a drink," Fuyuka drawled.

But while Xinglou may indeed have been teaching her, strictly speaking, Fuyuka wasn't one of her disciples. She was more of a guest receiving special instruction in *seisenjutsu* and had no intention of abandoning the techniques cultivated by the Umenokouji.

Those secret techniques had been lost for close to a millennium. Fuyuka, becoming head of the family at an incredibly young age, had managed to revive some of them, but there was still much knowledge left to be regained. Hoping to compensate for those missing skills, she had asked Xinglou to train her. And while Xinglou had never witnessed any of those lost techniques directly, she was in all likelihood the only person alive who had had any meaningful interaction with the Umenokouji clan before they vanished with the passing of time. There could be no better teacher.

Perhaps because of that history, or maybe for some other reason, Xinglou had maintained no more familiar a relationship with her than she did her formal disciples. She answered Fuyuka's questions about *seisenjutsu* politely and gave her other pieces of

advice from time to time, but she always maintained a certain distance between them both.

The only exception being today, now that they were on the cusp of reviving one of those lost techniques.

“Oh-ho… There’s something I have to confirm,” Xinglou said, her eyes narrowing slightly as she gazed up at the haze-shrouded moon.

“Oh my, again?”

“Your wish. Should you emerge victorious in the Lindvolus, what would you wish of the foundations?”

“Ah… I don’t believe I ever mentioned it, did I?”

Compared to the other schools, Jie Long had a particularly high participation rate in the Festa, thanks to its ethos prompting its students to test and push their abilities in combat.

Of course, there were those who entered the tournament with a specific goal in mind, a wish they wanted fulfilled—but on the whole, such students were probably in the minority. For that reason, wishes weren’t a major topic of conversation in these halls.

“Well, certainly you must have a faint idea, Master?” Fuyuka demurred.

Xinglou, however, merely stared back at her without responding.

Left with no choice but to elaborate, Fuyuka let out a deep sigh. “My wish…in a manner of speaking, is immortality.”

“Ha! I thought so.” Xinglou’s tone seemed somehow disappointed. She gulped down her drink.

She didn’t seem to think very much of it.

Of course, immortality was something not even the foundations could bestow. At best, all they could probably offer would be a state of cryogenic hibernation. Even with meteoric engineering, human science was only capable of extending one’s life span by so much.

Still, one could hardly say her dream was an impossibility.

After all, the person sitting across from her stood as a testament to that.

“Perhaps I’ll start by requesting entry to Huangshan, or Mount Emei, or maybe Mount Tai? I can look for the answer myself then.”

The Five Sacred Mountains were now under the control of Jie Long and not easily accessed. Not even the foundations seemed to have realized that what made those places so special were the huge urm-manadite deposits that lay dormant beneath them. But that

was hardly surprising.

"Ah… So even in this age, there are those who wish to transcend the physical realm."

"I had the misfortune of being born to a family that values only the ancient," Fuyuka said, hiding a puckered smile behind her sleeve.

"For you, I can't say it will be impossible. But it *is* a rather boring wish. If you ask me, those sages are no more than empty husks."

"Aren't they similar to you, though, Master?"

"Don't be daft. My technique is nothing more than the transmigration of the soul." Xinglou glared back at her angrily. "And here I had hoped to stimulate your inner mind."

"Oh dear, is that what we were here for?"

If that was the goal, this training certainly had been a waste of time.

Fuyuka had longed to become a sage far before she'd met Xinglou—or rather, to become an existence that endured through the ages by harnessing the power of demons.

Since ancient times, the Umenokouji lineage, inhabiting a sacred region home to dormant fragments of urm-manadite, had inherited special abilities allowing them to create and control *shikigami*. Those entities were best described as a kind of pseudo-life, created by weaving mana together. As such, being based on the same underlying principle as traditional spells or charms—including *seisenjutsu*—they existed only temporarily, but at the same time, they were immune from death. If they lost their shape, their revival was possible so long as the technique could be properly carried out.

It was said that in the days before the Invertia, when mana was still scarce, it had taken days of preparation and one's own lifeblood to summon a *shikigami*. In the modern age, which was overflowing with mana, such lengths were no longer necessary. Nonetheless, a *shikigami*'s strength stemmed not only from the mana that it was forged from but also from the person who weaved several of them together. It took considerable time to forge a new, complex technique, so she had used the ancient method, summoning the Meidouki to defeat Noelle Messmer.

Fuyuka possessed a remarkable talent even among past heads of the Umenokouji, and she had grown up spending more time with the *shikigami* passed down through the generations than with her

fellow humans. Only a small number of the creatures possessed high-level intelligence, but many, like the Meidouki, were long-lived. Their values and personalities all differed, but she got along well with them all. Because of that, some in the clan had taken to claiming she was possessed by the demons and had lost her sense of free will.

But if she could live for as long as they could—

"How about tomorrow's match? Do you feel you can win?" Xinglou asked, her expression lightening.

"…I would like to ask you the same question."

Her match tomorrow in the quarterfinals was against the Murakumo, Ayato Amagiri.

She had no intention of losing, but he would be a formidable opponent. On top of his physical abilities, he seemed to have almost completely mastered wielding the Ser Veresta. She had learned the technique that Xiaohui had employed to counter it in the Gryps, but she wondered whether that would be enough.

"I'll do my best to make it a pleasurable watch for you, Master."

"Ha! I see—I see. I look forward to it. You, your *shikigami*, and…the secret techniques of the Umenokouji." Xinglou let out a quiet laugh as she lifted her cup to her mouth.

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"And here we are! The sixth round of the Lindvolus, the quarterfinals, is getting underway! We're proud to bring you all the thrills and spills live from the Sirius Dome! Zaharoula, what should we look out for this round?"

"Right, well—firstly, I think we're all edging to see the second match at the Canopus Dome between Orphelia Landlufen and Sylvia Lyyneheym. Think of it as a rematch, or maybe a revenge match, between the diva and our reigning champion. And the third match, over at the Procyon Dome, between Saya Sasamiya's next-gen Luxes and the new autonomous puppet Lenaty will surely be a spectacle. I'm definitely looking forward to that one… But if you ask me, it'll be this first match, between Ayato Amagiri and Fuyuka Umenokouji, that will be the most interesting."

No sooner did the commentator Zaharoula finish responding to the announcer Mico's question than a loud cheer resounded throughout the venue, enough to make the air itself tremble in

anticipation.

Ayato, down on the stage, could feel that excitement palpably, but his mind was elsewhere.

It was hard to get a real grasp of his situation.

His first priority was to save Haruka's life, and to do that, he had to win this tournament. There was nothing wrong with focusing on winning.

On the other hand, he was relying on his friends to track down Lamina Mortis and close in on the Golden Bough Alliance. He had used his free day yesterday running around Asterisk with Saya and Sylvia, but they hadn't been able to find any helpful clues. Fortunately, Haruka and Helga seemed to be making some progress. He was beginning to feel a sense of urgency, but he had no choice other than to trust them.

He was also worried about Saya's and Sylvia's matches. Both were facing unprecedented opponents—Sylvia especially, given that she was up against the two-time champion of the tournament. It was only natural to be concerned. They hadn't spoken directly today, as their matches were in different venues, but they had sent each other messages of encouragement from their respective prep rooms. He hoped she would make it through safely.

Assuming he won his own match today, his next opponent would be his irreplaceable partner Julis, who had proceeded to the next round by default after her sixth-round opponent had been forced to drop out. That meant in order to save his own sister, he would be forced to shatter any chance Julis had of fulfilling her wish. That was an outcome he wanted to avoid at any cost.

Fuyuka let out an audible chuckle. "You look distracted, no?"

Ayato glanced up to see her staring at him with a placid grin. She was wearing a short-sleeved traditional jacket over the usual Jie Long uniform and grasped her enchanted folding fan in her hand.

"N-not really…," Ayato hastily responded, before correcting himself. "No, you're right. I guess I did let my mind wander a little. Sorry about that," he apologized, bowing his head.

Fuyuka was right. And if it was so obvious that she could see it, then he wasn't showing her the respect that she deserved as his opponent.

"Pah! What on earth are you doing? You're even stranger than I thought!" Despite her words, there was a distinct elegance to her

guffaw, like the sound of small bells ringing. “It’s better for me if you’re that way. There’s nothing better than an easy match.”

“Oh, er…”

He couldn’t fault her logic there.

“But I think I understand what my master and Hufeng and Alema see in you. Yes, indeed…” She raised her right hand, her shoulders shaking in amusement. “You might not think my way of fighting to be particularly aboveboard…but good luck, Murakumo.”

“…You too.” As he shook her hand, the audience erupted into a great roar.

“What a warm handshake between our two contestants! Yep, this is one of the great joys of the Festa! And…ah, looks like we’re about to get underway!”

As Mico’s voice sounded around them, Ayato and Fuyuka returned to their respective starting positions.

He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and locking his thoughts and doubts away.

“Lindvolus Quarterfinals, Match 1—begin!”

The automated voice blared out, but neither he nor his opponent made any sudden moves.

“…Oh? This *is* a surprise. And here I was thinking you would come flying toward me.”

“I’m sure you were. Which is why I didn’t.”

Ayato, of course, had done his research on Fuyuka’s fighting style.

Her specialty was summoning and controlling creatures forged from mana, in a similar manner to that of Gustave Malraux, whom he had fought in Lieseltania. That being the case, what he needed to do was bring the fight to the summoner herself. Gustave’s defense had been to keep himself at a distance removed from the battle, but that wasn’t possible here. The best strategy would be to finish things quickly and decisively before she had a chance to summon a *shikigami*.

However, thanks to having reviewed several recordings of her training matches at Jie Long that Shadowstar had managed to get their hands on, he knew she was also an adept martial artist. The recordings were short, but his guess was that she employed a

technique that turned her foe's strength against them—likely an old form of aikido or jujitsu. Her movements, based on a defensive posture, reminded him somehow of his own Amagiri Shinmei style. And their handshake all but confirmed it. Those were indisputably well-trained hands.

That being the case, he couldn't afford to be careless. She was no doubt expecting him to rush into an attack, meaning that she was probably ready to counter. Of course, with his current strength, he might be able to reach her first, or even avoid her counter altogether, and yet…

With this leg…

The wound on his right leg from his match against Rodolfo Zoppo wasn't very deep, fortunately, but his condition was still far from his best. It had an undeniable effect on his movements, and if it delayed him by even a second, that could be all the time this opponent required.

He couldn't afford to take the risk.

"How lucky of me. I suppose I'll go first, then." Fuyuka chuckled, leaping to the far end of the stage.

"Jí jí rú lǜ lìng, chì!"

She thrust her hand forward with two fingers outstretched, and a reddish-black light suddenly emanated from her. Quickly, a three-eyed *shikigami*, a horned creature clad in ancient armor, appeared before her. It was like a demon from an old fable—dark red of skin, wielding a gigantic chained ax—and must have been at least eight feet tall.

"Oh-ho, a sharp foe. This should be interesting." The creature grinned, flashing its fangs.

A formidable aura emanated from the monster.

Ayato knew what it was capable of from how it had defeated Noelle Messmer, but the sense of danger he felt seeing it firsthand was something else.

On top of that, Fuyuka waved her fingers through the air, unleashing countless bat-like apparitions, which promptly clung to Gigoku's ax.

"This should do it. Now then, Gigoku, I'll leave the rest to you."

"Very well," it answered before taking a thundering step toward Ayato.

"Name yourself, young warrior!"

"…Ayato Amagiri."

“Then heed this, Ayato Amagiri! I am Gigoku! Scion of the West! Guardian demon of the Umenokouji!”

That bellowing voice echoed across the stage as the creature’s tree trunk–like legs hit the ground.

The monster closed the gap between them in a split second, forcing Ayato to use the Ser Veresta to parry its downswing.

“Guh…!”

“Ngh…!”

Ayato’s bones creaked under the pressure, the blow even more powerful than he had anticipated. He pushed the ax vertically in order to free their interlocked weapons and quickly launched into a long sweep with his blade. Gigoku, however, leaped backward through the air with a nimbleness that belied its appearance.

As Ayato waited for the creature to land on the ground, it adjusted its grip on its ax and swung the chain with its left hand, hoping to trip him up. Ayato moved out of its range by half a step and brought down the Ser Veresta.

Each time they crossed weapons, red flames licked from Gigoku’s ax. That was no doubt one of Fuyuka’s enchantments. The weapon looked to be protected by charms to defend against the Ser Veresta, just as Xiaohui’s had been in their match during the Gryps.

As he increased the speed of his attack, Gigoku increased its own to equal him, quickly overtaking him and launching into a counter. Ayato, too, moved into a higher gear to compensate. Neither one of them retreating, their weapons crashing against each other (although strictly speaking he had yet to reach through those charms), he concentrated on driving his blade to its target.

“Wh-what an impressive defense! All I can make out is the flash of their weapons!”

“That Gigoku certainly is something, going head-to-head with Ayato Amagiri’s swordsmanship… If it were a student, it would be in the highest rankings.”

Finally, their attacks were enough to throw both of them off-balance, and they each retreated to their respective sides of the stage.

“Phew… That was rough,” Ayato murmured unawares as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

Gigoku’s close-combat ability probably surpassed Xiaohui’s back in the Gryps. Xiaohui had grown much stronger since then, and while Ayato had yet to face him again himself, he suspected

that Gigoku's prowess was in no way inferior.

"Impressive, Ayato Amagiri," the creature called out, readying its ax once more.

Fuyuka began to apply more charms to the ax. She was no doubt replenishing the myriad enchantments that the Ser Veresta had burned through. This could pose a problem.

Ayato, however, hadn't let the past year go to waste.

He concentrated his prana on the Ser Veresta, letting it flow into the Orga Lux. That was the cost of wielding it at its full potential. And in response, the blade began to tremble in his hands.

"Aughhhhh!"

With a roar, Ayato leaped toward the summoned creature, bringing his blade up from below.

"Ngh…?!"

Unlike their previous exchange, Ayato cut straight through his opponent's weapon this time. The charms protecting it burst into flame, dying out in less than a heartbeat.

Gigoku leaned backward in an attempt to evade the strike, but the armor protecting its chest split clean in two, the lower half vanishing into thin air before it could hit the ground. Its ax had already completely vanished. By the looks of it, a *shikigami*'s weapons and armor simply evaporated when destroyed.

The creature's three eyes opened wide in surprise, but Ayato didn't pause his assault.

Gigoku leaped backward, away from the follow-through strike, but its defensive posture was in tatters. Ayato lunged forward with all his strength, when all of a sudden, he was struck by a series of powerful lightning-like blasts.

"Dear me, that was a little too close."

When he turned around, he saw that Fuyuka was clutching a handful of spell charms, like an open folding fan, staring back at him with a cool smile.

Naturally, this match wasn't a one-on-one against Gigoku. Fuyuka might not have been about to insert herself into the middle of this face-off, but she could still support her *shikigami* from a distance. Indeed, there were countless support patterns available in *seisenjutsu*. He couldn't afford to let down his guard.

Nonetheless, Ayato raised the Ser Veresta in front of him—carefully, without hurrying.

Gigoku was strong. But even with Fuyuka's support, it wasn't

unbeatable.

Not against Ayato's sword techniques and the Ser Veresta.

His Orga Lux could burn through anything and was impossible to guard against. If he drew on its true power, he should be able to easily cut through anything that Fuyuka's spells could throw his way. It was difficult to maintain this state for too long, as it would rapidly deplete his prana, but he should, he thought, be able to hold out at least for this match.

"That Runesword of yours…is a truly frightening weapon."

"I did take countermeasures against it, but I suppose they weren't enough."

Both Gigoku and Fuyuka were impressed, but neither seemed particularly perturbed. They were probably still guarding another strategy. Nor did Ayato think he could bring the match to a close just yet.

"Well, now… This might be overdoing it, but I suppose we'll see if I can't overwhelm you."

No sooner did Fuyuka finish speaking than countless spell charms poured forth from the sleeves of her coat. He thought the same thing every time he faced one of Jie Long's *daoshi*, but he couldn't help but wonder where she kept that seemingly inexhaustible stock of charms.

The paper slips soared high into the air, spreading over the stage in all directions.

In the blink of an eye, those charms transformed by the dozens into swords, daggers, axes, and spears. There must have been hundreds of them. As Ayato dodged the torrent of weapons that came plummeting toward the stage, his surroundings morphed into a forest of chaotic armaments.

"Wh-what's this?! Contestant Umenokouji's charms have turned into weapons!"

"I suppose if your current weapon is useless against the Ser Veresta, the idea is just to throw it away and try new ones en masse. It's rather showy and not an easy strategy to defend against, and yet…"

Ayato had to agree.

The Ser Veresta's real worth was that it was impossible to defend against. The fact that it destroyed any weapons it came into contact with was merely a side effect.

He quickly realized that Gigoku had picked up a long spear, carefully calculating the distance between them, while Fuyuka, at

the back of the stage, had put her fingers together in another complex pattern.

Damn it…! That's—

"Jí jí rú lǜ lìng, chì!"

At that moment, a pale-blue light erupted around her, from which a new demonic figure began to emerge.

The *shikigami* took the form of a long-haired woman, perhaps a fraction shorter in height than Gigoku. Her skin was blue in color, she possessed four arms, and the single horn in the center of her forehead was longer and thinner than that of her counterpart. She had sharp eyes and a well-formed countenance that one could only call beautiful. Her toned physique was garbed in only narrow clothes that covered her chest and waist. In her four arms, she grasped a gigantic bow engraved in a complex, intricate pattern.

"Do forgive me, Giken. I don't suppose you could lend Gigoku a hand?"

"As you command," the demon replied solemnly before briefly exchanging glances with Gigoku and turning toward Ayato. "I am Giken, scion of the West, guardian demon of the Umenokouji. I commend myself to your acquaintance."

Her serene voice sent a shiver coursing down Ayato's spine.

"This…doesn't look good."

Giken emanated as menacing an aura as Gigoku. To be honest, Ayato hadn't been anticipating a second *shikigami* of the same level.

"Don't tell me you have more of them just waiting to be called on?"

"I wonder…?" Fuyuka answered with a soft chuckle. "I really shouldn't say, but unfortunately, the truth is this is it. I'm already at my limit summoning these two simultaneously."

Her smile never wavered, but she did seem to be under a little pressure, her brow beginning to glisten with sweat. Her prana didn't seem to be particularly depleted, so summoning or employing the *shikigami* must have been taking some other toll on her.

"That said, Gigoku and Giken are the most powerful *shikigami* ever created over the Umenokoujis' thousand-year history. *Shikigami* are immortal, you know, so they have an endless appetite."

Taking that as a signal, Gigoku broke into a run.

As he prepared to respond, Ayato realized something was wrong.

His body had become unusually hot, his limbs strangely heavy.

He swayed on his feet, his head cloudy, as if struck by a sudden fever.

This… This is…!

"Giken's curses are much more powerful than *seisenjutsu*. You should watch yourself."

Having dodged Gigoku's repeated spear thrusts by a hairsbreadth, Ayato glanced toward Giken to find the air around her all but humming with an abundance of mana. Two of her four arms were entwined to make a complex symbol, with energy building up around her.

"What a wonderful world this is, where tools, ceremonies, and incantations are no longer required," she said with a cruel, sagacious smirk.

There could be no mistaking it—Giken's curse was what was holding him down.

Even so, why is this having such a strong effect on me…?!

No matter how strong one's abilities in mental or physical interference, the effects of such skills were curtailed when used on targets possessing a high amount of prana and so were less effective against Genestella. Back in the Gryps, Team Hellion's Medulone, with a unique petrification ability, had been ineffective against an opponent with greater prana. The only exceptions to that rule were Orga Luxes like the Lyre-Poros, which meant that Giken's curses must have been of a similar magnitude. Even with Fuyuka's Umenokouji family perfecting these techniques over a millennium, this was still exceptional.

"Guh…!"

Stumbling, Ayato countered with the Ser Veresta, burning straight through Gigoku's spear. His opponent fell back in an attempt to retreat, casting aside its broken weapon and pulling a large sword from the ground, but that brief moment was enough.

Ayato gripped the Ser Veresta in his right hand, pouring his prana into it.

"Now!"

As he moved his blade, a wave of red heat burst forth, and his body became suddenly light again.

Just as Haruka had used the Orga Lux to burn through the manipulated memories the Varda-Vaos had placed in her mind, so too did Ayato cut through Giken's curse.

And yet—

“U-ugh…!”

Seemingly no sooner was he free than his body became heavy once more, his thoughts sluggish.

“Did you just break through my curse? This world truly is full of mystery. I guess I’ll have to use it again.” Giken pulled back the string of her bow as she spoke, a black arrow appearing notched in place. By the looks of it, the weapon automatically generated those ominous projectiles.

“Cut!”

Gigoku took advantage of that opening to strike head-on with a sword.

Ayato slashed diagonally to deflect it but was forced to sustain Giken’s arrow, which came flying at a blistering, haphazard trajectory. He twisted to evade Gigoku’s next attack, but Fuyuka, as if having anticipated his timing, exploded another charm right before his eyes.

“Augh!”

He focused his prana to defend against the attack, but was nonetheless thrown backward, tumbling across the ground. The spell was similar to that which he had faced from the Li twins during the Phoenix—but much, much more powerful.

On top of that, Gigoku wasn’t about to relent. The *shikigami* closed the gap that had opened between them, forcing Ayato to hurriedly restore his defensive posture with the Ser Veresta. He didn’t even have time to catch his breath.

With Gigoku attacking from the front, Giken from the rear, and Fuyuka acting as support, the three worked with formidable coordination.

This one opponent could no doubt have very well taken on even the best teams from the Gryps.

Due to Giken’s curse, Ayato’s physical performance and judgment were greatly impaired.

If only he could use the Ser Veresta to free himself for a brief moment, he would be able to overcome this critical situation.

“This is intense…!” he muttered under his breath as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Ha-ha-ha! Looks like even the fabled Ayato Amagiri is having a hard time of it!”

Xinglou, in Jie Long’s special viewing lounge, clapped her

hands together in delight. She wasn't as worked up as she had been during the fifth round, but the ferocity of this sixth-round match was in no way inferior. Hufeng was on tenterhooks, worrying that things could go wrong at any moment.

"Yeah, but don't you think Fuyuka's *shikigami* are kind of against the rules? Especially for the Lindvolus," asked Cecily with a wry grin, standing across from Xinglou.

"If it's within the scope of the rules and a fighter can't cope with it, that's simply a sign of no more than their own immaturity," Xinglou replied coolly.

"I never would have imagined there could be two *shikigami* as powerful as that," Hufeng murmured.

As far as he could see, if they were students, both *shikigami* would have been ranked as Page Ones. As much as he hated to admit it, if he were to face Gigoku head-to-head, he doubted that even he would emerge victorious.

"Well, those two are special. From what I gather, only a handful of people have ever been able to control both of them at the same time. Considering that alone, Fuyuka's talent is astounding."

"Yeah, but how exactly does Giken's curse actually work?" Cecily remarked with frustration, biting her nails. "It isn't a human skill; that's for sure."

As a *daoshi*, that mystery seemed to be particularly troubling to her.

"Giken's techniques and abilities are all woven into its very essence. It isn't like Stregas or Dantes, who can interact with mana using their prana as an intermediary—that curse is mana itself. No doubt it needed the support of tools or particular geographies back when it was first created due to the small quantity of mana in the environment. Now, though, in this modern age overflowing with mana, it can take its fill. But on the other hand, it doesn't seem to be quite as physically imposing as Gigoku."

"Meaning…," Hufeng murmured, "at this rate, Fuyuka's going to win, right?"

"I wonder? She's up against the Murakumo, after all. Something tells me it isn't over yet," Cecily answered with a dark grin.

"Indeed, I wouldn't expect her to face down Ayato Amagiri so easily… But then, it's difficult to imagine Fuyuka losing, either. And, of course…" Xinglou trailed off there, her eyes narrowing as her shoulders quivered in delight. "Of course, she's still holding on

to her best card."

"Just look at that utter onslaught! Contestant Umenokouji's twin shikigami *are working in perfect coordination! Can Contestant Amagiri keep up?!"*

"I would say he's in a bad situation, but he's holding out remarkably well. He's suffering blows but sustaining only minimal damage… I'd expect no less of the Murakumo."

Despite the commentary, Ayato found himself cornered.

Gigoku's assault was relentless, one violent and formidable attack after another. No matter how many times Ayato destroyed its weapons with the Ser Veresta, his foe immediately switched to another, and whether spear, sword, or ax, Gigoku was a master of them all.

Giken kept herself at a distance from the intensity of their close-range combat, launching one strike after another with her bow. Not only that, her actions were in perfect harmony with Gigoku's—and came at the worst possible times for Ayato. And above all, her curse still fell heavily over him without respite.

Moreover, Fuyuka's spell charms seemed to have a knack for finding his blind spots. They were completely unpredictable—at times a bolt of lightning, or an explosion, or a direct attack from a newly summoned, lesser *shikigami*.

He was having a hard time enduring the three-pronged assault, and in spite of his best efforts, he was taking damage.

"Haah… Haah…!"

Panting, he focused his prana into his injuries. He had yet to suffer a fatal blow, but his uniform was strewn with lacerations, his body with cuts and bruises.

He was short of breath, but of course his opponent wasn't about to give him an opportunity to rest.

"Tch!"

Ayato leaped backward away from Gigoku's spear attack, spinning around to meet Giken's next arrow strike in midair. At that moment, Fuyuka released three more spell charms, each taking on the form of a one-eyed crow. As he landed on the ground and regained his footing, Ayato dispelled two of them with the Ser Veresta, but the remaining one dived toward him, tearing into his side.

He grimaced in pain. His wounds may have been light, but they

were piling up.

And I still haven't found an opening…

Even in a coordinated attack, every member couldn't always make the most optimal decisions. The longer the contest continued, the more likely someone was to slip up. Ayato knew that well from his experiences in the Gryps. Even Team Lancelot, who had arguably boasted the highest degree of coordination, hadn't been able to carry out a joint attack entirely without error. And while he would admit that it may have been possible for autonomous puppets like Ardy or Rimcy, with computation capabilities far exceeding the reflexes of human beings, to work with greater efficiency, in an actual battle with multiple fighters, even they would have to correct for discrepancies in real time. Perfect coordination was simply unrealistic.

And yet, Gigoku and Giken's actions were just that. They were in perfect harmony. Fuyuka was simply taking advantage of that to add a few extra touches of her own. The only reason Ayato had managed to survive this long was because he was using the Amagiri Shinmei style's perception-increasing technique *shiki* and, of course, the overwhelming advantage that the Ser Veresta possessed over regular weapons.

If he could find an opening, he might break out of this situation. But against these foes, the odds of that appeared to be low. That being the case, his only option was to force an opening himself, but his opponents were unlikely to give him much time.

Ayato let out a deep breath.

It looked like he had no choice.

He would have to use his second hidden ace.

Without letting down his guard against the ferocity of the attack that still beat against him, he allowed himself to melt away into the state of *shiki*, letting it stretch out, to become deeper and more intense.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Ultimate Technique II—*Wazaogi!*"

"Huh…?"

As Ayato lowered his blade, Gigoku looked at him in suspicion, though it kept its spear at the ready.

Ayato, however, could sense what he needed to do almost reflexively. A half step to evade Gigoku's next attack, following through to let Giken's next shot fly past him, and a flicker of the Ser Veresta before Fuyuka's spell charms could fully activate…

“Huh? There’s something different about Ayato Amagiri’s movements…”

Zaharoula’s suspicions rang out over the commentary. As editor of the unofficial ranking site Odhroerir, she clearly had a sharp eye.

If she noticed at first glance, then of course Gigoku and Giken must have, too.

“Ngh…!”

“This is…”

The expressions of both *shikigami* grew yet more severe as they continued with their attacks.

Now, however, they couldn’t even touch him. Each of Gigoku’s spear thrusts, Giken’s arrows, and Fuyuka’s spell charms flew right past him.

“Wh-what’s going on?! Just when Contestant Umenokouji looks to have Contestant Amagiri cornered, he manages to dodge every last one of her attacks!”

“The two shikigami *are still just as efficient as they were a moment ago. It’s Amagiri’s reaction time that’s changed. He’s faster now…* too *fast.”*

Even Zaharoula seemed taken aback.

That was understandable. If the first Amagiri Shinmei Style, Ultimate Technique—*Tsugomori*, was the perfect countermove, then the *Wazaogi* was the perfect defense. By expanding the scope and depth of the mental state of *shiki*, his body now moved almost automatically in response to every form of attack. And by forgoing any form of counterattack, his body could move faster than any opponent whose own strikes couldn’t match his reaction speed.

According to Haruka, the word *Wazaogi* referred to invoking the godlike spirit that resided in one’s own body. And as the word implied, he was moving with a truly godlike speed.

“Oh dear, how graceful. It’s like a dance. But you don’t hope to win by running away, do you? Or are you trying to drag this out?” Fuyuka, her hands filled with spell charms, stared across the stage at him, her eyes opening slightly wider. “Well, it doesn’t matter. If you’re not going to attack, you’ll just have to ready yourself for this.”

At that moment, a gigantic magic circle opened up, from which countless deformed *shikigami* poured out. It was the *Hyakki Yakou* she had summoned during the qualifying matches. None of them appeared to be particularly powerful, but she no doubt meant to

overwhelm him with their sheer number.

Ayato, however, had anticipated this.

He wouldn't allow himself to be defeated so long as he was using the *Wazaogi*, but at the same time, he wouldn't be able to take down his foes if he were to stay on defense forever. The technique was originally devised for survival on the battlefield, and he understood that it wasn't suited to individual tournament-run matches.

All he needed, however, was a little time.

Time not to recklessly deplete his prana but to delicately adjust it, to release a perfectly formed and controlled burst with Meteor Arts.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

With a terrible roar, he emerged from the *Wazaogi* state, bringing the Ser Veresta around with explosive force.

"Huh?!"

"Wha—?!"

Both Gigoku's and Giken's eyes widened, aghast, as they tried to flee, but they were far too slow.

Having initiated a mana excitation overload, the Ser Veresta swelled in size. Unlike the previous times Ayato had done this, however, it hadn't only grown larger—it was now sharper, more supple, streamlined to its bare essentials, and unmistakably powerful.

If he had used his usual Meteor Arts, he wouldn't have been able to reach Gigoku and Giken, in all likelihood. They would easily evade his attacks and would probably take advantage of them to deal a fatal counter.

However, optimizing the Ser Veresta as he had now, he stood a chance. Doing so took a certain amount of time to perfect, which was why he had used the *Wazaogi* technique.

"Ngh…!"

"Tch!"

With a bright flash, the Orga Lux tore through Gigoku's left arm and Giken's bow and blew aside more than half of the other *shikigami* that Fuyuka had summoned just a moment prior.

Ayato wasn't about to ignore his chance. Restoring the Ser Veresta to its optimal size, he charged forward. His target as he tore through the forest of assorted weapons was, of course, Fuyuka herself.

Gigoku and Giken reacted immediately, trying to block his way, but Ayato was one step ahead of them.

"Oh dear… This won't do," Fuyuka murmured as she called the remaining *Hyakki Yakou* to form a wall in front of her.

Even with Giken's curse and Ayato's leg injury, these kinds of *shikigami* posed no obstacle. With the Ser Veresta, he could cut through them all in one fell swoop.

This is it…!

With one long stride, he aimed the Orga Lux at the school crest on his opponent's chest.

However—

"…*Shikigami* syncretism," Fuyuka whispered, and at that moment, a great vortex of mana sucked the *shikigami* right into *her body*.

"Huh…?!"

The next instant, Fuyuka avoided his rapid strike, catching the blade of the Ser Veresta in her bare hands.

Ayato tightened his grip, pushing with all his strength, but his sword refused to budge. As hard as it was to believe, she was now on par with his own physical strength.

Even so, the heat alone from grasping that blade should have seared her hands to cinders, but Fuyuka merely stepped toward him, her complexion unchanging. Before he knew it, she was within hand-to-hand fighting range and extended her left arm toward him.

This is bad…!

Out of options, he let go of the Orga Lux and fell back.

If he hadn't, she would probably have broken his arm.

"Phew… We were both in a bit of a pinch there," Fuyuka said slowly, hurling the Ser Veresta over her shoulder.

The blade spun through the air before landing embedded in the floor of the stage.

"…You got me. I wasn't expecting you to fight barehanded," Ayato replied, glancing across at Gigoku and Giken.

Gigoku was calmly reattaching his fallen right arm, while Giken had moved across the stage to stop Ayato from retrieving the Ser Veresta. Clever.

"Now, now, I *am* a student of Jie Long. What would I be if I couldn't do this much…? Ha! I'm kidding! You fell for it, didn't you? I could never stand a chance fighting toe to toe with you!" Fuyuka chuckled, hiding her mouth behind her sleeve.

“Then what was that…?”

“A secret technique of the Umenokouji, *shikigami* syncretism. Long lost to time, but I’ve finally revived it. A technique to combine multiple *shikigami* into a single reserve of strength… Impressive, wouldn’t you say?”

Ayato had suspected as much.

She hadn’t brought the myriad *shikigami* toward her to shield herself but rather to use this technique.

“I’m sorry, but it’s still difficult to control… Heh.”

Fuyuka rolled back her sleeve, revealing her right arm. Her palm was scorched from having grasped the Ser Veresta and was drooping unnaturally from the wrist. It appeared to be broken.

“Maybe I’ve overdone it a little. It looks like human flesh can’t withstand this many of them…”

Nonetheless, Fuyuka’s smile never wavered. How on earth could she be so confident?

But she was.

“In that case, I wouldn’t overdo it if I were you,” Ayato said, pulling a rather standard Japanese katana from the ground. For the first time, he found himself grateful that Gigoku had littered the stage with weapons.

“Oh-ho, not at all! I said human flesh, no? But what if I were to give that power to someone strong enough to wield it?”

“Wha—?!”

Before Fuyuka could even finish speaking, Gigoku charged toward him.

The *shikigami* punched a gaping hole in the ground with the end of its spear, following through with a slash intended to gouge out Ayato’s throat, which he only caught with his katana at the last minute.

“Now then, how about we finish this?”

And with that, the myriad *shikigami* that Fuyuka had brought into herself now flew into Gigoku, its body swelling in size. Ayato may have been able to catch the last attack, but he could feel his opponent’s strength growing immeasurably.

“Guh…!”

He rolled backward before he could be overwhelmed. When he glanced back toward Gigoku, he saw the *shikigami* had grown to tower over him at almost sixteen feet tall.

“This is just…”

The *shikigami*'s crushing presence was different now, more intense.

"This is the main event. Don't hold back now, Giken."

"As you wish." And with that, the *shikigami*, until now waiting patiently by the sidelines, leaped toward Gigoku.

"Don't tell me…?!"

She reached out to Gigoku with her four outstretched arms—and in the very next moment, she was sucked inside him.

"Hrraaaaaaaaaah!"

A deafening roar shook through the air, and the giant swelled in size again…and again. Another horn emerged from its forehead, two more arms sprouting from its shoulders, and still it continued to balloon in size, until it must have been more than thirty feet from head to toe.

Even the crowds seemed to be left shaken by its menacing aura.

“Wh-what’s this?! Contestant Umenokouji has fused all her shikigami *together! Is this allowed? It is, right? Right?”*

“…Well, there’s no rule against *it, I suppose. Beats me, though.”*

“Phew… Now *this* is the Umenokoujis’ *shikigami*. If you think you can defeat it, by all means, do go ahead and try.” Judging by her pale complexion, Fuyuka was obviously tiring, but still she broke into a mirth-filled laugh.

Ayato rushed to recover the Ser Veresta, but before he could reach it, Gigoku had already moved in front of him. The *shikigami* was no longer carrying any weapons, its four arms bunched into fists.

How can something that big move so fast…?!

Ayato reacted instinctively, crossing his arms in a defensive posture.

“Gyarghhhhhhhhh!”

He was thrown across the stage, taking on the full brunt of those giant treelike limbs. Fuyuka, meanwhile, unleashed a spell to destroy the various weapons that littered the arena.

“Gurghhhhhhhhh!”

Even focusing his prana to withstand the attack, Ayato could still feel his bones creaking, his flesh being crushed.

He immediately stood up, trying to regain his fighting stance, but Gigoku was already falling head-on toward him.

Ayato leaped backward before he could be pummeled into the ground, cast aside his broken katana, and pulled out a nearby spear.

“Grrrrrrrrrr…!”

Gigoku glared down at Ayato with its three eyes, letting out a menacing growl.

Outwardly, the *shikigami* seemed to have lost its faculties of reason and intelligence, but Ayato quickly realized that wasn’t the case. It was the same as before…or perhaps even more astute. On top of that, its strength and speed now completely exceeded his own.

At least if I had the Ser Veresta…

He glanced around, but Gigoku wasn’t about to let him retrieve it so easily. The Orga Lux was far behind the towering spirit.

“Aughhhhhhhhhh!”

Gigoku let out a wailing howl, charging toward him.

Dodging all four limbs was an impossible trial, and while he managed to evade the first three, the fourth sent him flying backward from a massive backhand strike.

Ayato let himself go limp as he hit the ground. He bounced back up, quickly rising to his feet. Shaking his ringing head, he charged Gigoku. Against an opponent like this, he doubted that he would last long without using his *Wazaogi* technique, but buying a little time would do him no good unless he had a plan of attack.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Spear Technique—*Ninth-Cloud Hornet!*"

He launched three sharp spear strikes with all his might, but far from damaging even one of Gigoku's huge arms, the spear itself shattered in his hands.

"Oh no—"

He had given his foe an opening.

And Gigoku hadn't failed to overlook it, kicking him high into the air.

As he came tumbling toward the ground, he tried to brace himself with his arms, but—

"Gah…!"

It wasn't a controlled landing.

The impact was enough to carve a crater into the ground. Blood seeping from his wounds, Ayato desperately fought not to lose consciousness. Somehow, he managed to lift his upper half, but his whole body was screaming in agony, and he could hardly move.

"Auuuuuuuuughh!"

Gigoku's huge frame entered his blurry field of vision.

The *shikigami* raised its fists, meaning to literally crush him.

This…this is pretty bad, huh…?

But then—

Something brushed against his dimming awareness.

A sure intention, something that couldn't be expressed in words. It was a sensation that he had experienced before. First in the Phoenix, when fighting Irene…and the Gravisheath.

And most recently, while training with Haruka.

Right. He understood now. It was the will of the Ser Veresta.

But there was something unusual this time.

Now, he wasn't holding the Orga Lux. But even so, his connection with it was stronger than it had ever been before.

The Ser Veresta was angry.

He couldn't understand why. Perhaps he had disappointed it.

But then, the Ser Veresta had always felt that way toward him. Dissatisfied, displeased, frustrated, angry—ever since he first met it, it had been filled with those emotions.

Only then did he realize it. The Orga Lux had been trying to tell him something.

Right. So that was it.

And as he was now—

"Gyaaarrrrrrrrrrrgh!"

"Come on," Ayato murmured, as Gigoku's arm swung down.

He raised his own hand.

The Ser Veresta slashed through the air, burning Gigoku's arm to ash as it landed in Ayato's outstretched palm.

"Wh-whaaaaaaaaaat?! Just when it looks like Contestant Amagiri is done for, the Ser Veresta has moved all by itself and sliced off an arm from Contestant Umenokouji's ultimate shikigami*!"*

"Phew… Thanks, Ser Veresta," Ayato said with gratitude as he stumbled to his feet and brought the Orga Lux in front of him.

It wasn't all that surprising. On the day of his compatibility test, when he first met the Ser Veresta, the weapon had raged uncontrollably, moving all by itself. What it had done just now wasn't much different.

And he now felt he could wield the Ser Veresta with greater mastery than ever before.

"Gaaaarrrrrghhhh!"

Meanwhile, Gigoku picked up its fallen arm, reattaching it as it had done a short time ago. According to legend, demons were supposedly able to reattach their heads even if they were cut off. It was certainly impressive.

That said, Ayato didn't need to behead the creature. All he needed to do was win the match.

"…All right, let's do this."

As if in response, the Ser Veresta began to shake more strongly.

The Orga Lux flew through the air toward the *shikigami*, Ayato following directly behind.

"Gyarghhhhhhhhh!"

Just as he had trusted, the weapon attacked the *shikigami* independently, moving freely by itself.

I see… This must be what it's like using a Rect Lux…

It was a strange sensation given that he had always fought as a swordsman, but luckily, he had long trained with one of Asterisk's

most proficient Rect Lux users. He understood just how useful and effective a remote weapon like this could be when properly utilized.

Gigoku was clearly struggling to resist the thing. At its current size, the Ser Veresta was as small as a scrawny twig. But if the *shikigami* were to try to knock it down, it would only end up wounding itself.

Nonetheless, Gigoku continued to dodge the sword's attacks. Gigoku fell back, lashing out at the hilt of the weapon. Its defense, covering all directions around it, was a testament to the chimera's impressive physical specs.

Even so, it had failed to take account of Ayato himself.

And by that moment, he had already slid beneath the *shikigami*, ready to strike.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style Grappling Technique—*Stance Breaker!*"

Focusing all his strength, he delivered an almighty openhanded strike to that pillar-like ankle. Against this opponent, he doubted it would cause any damage. His *Stance Breaker* technique was simply meant to disrupt its target's fighting posture and was one of the most fundamental of the Amagiri Shinmei style grappling techniques. But with the Ser Veresta striking from above and the *shikigami*'s balance lost from below—

"Gwarghhhhhhhhhh!"

No matter how huge you were, a move like that was bound to knock you off your feet.

And then—

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Hidden Technique—*Crescent Carnage!*"

Without even needing to grasp the Ser Veresta in his hands, Ayato unleashed the technique.

The Orga Lux soared through the air at incredible speed, slashing across all four of the *shikigami*'s arms before coming down again from above.

"Gaughhhhhhhhhh!"

Gigoku fell flat on its back with a tremendous thud, sending dust rising up from the floor of the stage.

Ayato leaped onto its chest, grasping the Ser Veresta as it flew back to his hand, and thrust it deep into the *shikigami*.

"Gwaaaaaaurghh!"

Gigoku's three eyes blazed as they fixed Ayato with a deathly stare, but there was nothing more the *shikigami* could do.

"Well, I think that just about settles it… Don't you?" Ayato said,

glancing toward Fuyuka.

Fuyuka continued to watch him, her narrowed eyes and cool smile unchanging, until her expression finally relaxed, and she flashed him a bitter smile. "…Yes. I'm all out. I surrender." She let out a deep sigh, elegantly raising her hands into the air.

"Fuyuka Umenokouji—forfeit."
"End of battle! Winner: Ayato Amagiri!"

As the automated voice rang out, with the cheers of the crowd washing down on him, Ayato brought the Ser Veresta around with a flourish and gently stroked its core.

"Thanks, Ser Veresta."

Without the Orga Lux, he never would have been able to emerge victorious here.

The Ser Veresta, however, made no response. Although, knowing it as well as he did, that was to be expected.

"…Same old, same old, huh?" he said, struck by a complex mixture of joy and sorrow.

Now, his next opponent would be *her*.

CHAPTER 3
THE QUARTERFINALS II

Sylvia returned to that rainy day when she had just turned nine years old—when Ursula Svend first came to her hometown.

It seemed Ursula had set up a tent near the forest on the outskirts of town and meant to stay there for at least a short while. The locals had been left all flustered by the sudden appearance of this strange outsider, yet they didn't try to drive her away. They were all good people. But even so, their timidity meant they didn't actively seek out her company, either.

Except for one person—Sylvia.

"Hello. Would you like some coffee?"

"Huh?!"

Sylvia had been moving cautiously through the tall grass, hiding behind a large rock as she tried to steal a peek at the town's visitor, only to find Ursula looking back at her with a broad smile.

She tried to make herself small, glancing around as she wondered what to do. Five long minutes passed before she finally poked her head up again from behind the rock.

"…H-how did you know I was here?"

"Hmm… The smell, maybe?"

"What?!"

Could it really be that bad? She hurriedly sniffed at her arms and clothes. She didn't normally wear these clothes, but she had wanted something that would be easy to move around in. It probably wasn't a good idea to leave them in the back of her closet for so long, she thought.

"Ha… Ha-ha-ha! Sorry, it was a joke! I was kidding!" Seeing

just how the young Sylvia had taken her comment, Ursula broke into a loud laugh.

"Wh-why…?!"

Sylvia could feel her face turning bright red as she puffed out her cheeks.

Ursula, however, held out a metal cup. "I've got good ears. I could hear you moving through the grass and the gravel under your feet. Your breathing, too, actually."

Sylvia wasn't sure how to respond, but as Ursula still hadn't withdrawn the cup, she decided to cautiously accept it. When Sylvia brought it to her lips, she was surprised by just how sweet it was. The warm coffee was mixed with a very generous serving of milk and sugar.

Sipping at the drink, she finally had a chance to examine her surroundings in detail.

The tent wasn't particularly large and could probably house no more than two adults. The sun was still shining, but there was a bonfire lit nearby and a small rock that Ursula was using as a chair beside it. And on closer inspection, the metal cup she was holding looked to be quite old and worn.

"Ah, you're the young lady who let me wait out the rain outside your house," Ursula exclaimed, clapping her hands in sudden realization.

Indeed. Several days ago, Ursula had suddenly appeared outside Sylvia's window in the middle of the rain. Even now, Sylvia could still vividly recall the moment she had first seen Ursula when she had opened the curtains.

"Thanks again. I hadn't had a chance to properly set up my tent yet." Ursula let out a refreshing laugh.

She possessed a mature face, but she seemed younger than Sylvia had first assumed, perhaps still in her mid-teens. Her faintly light-blue hair was haphazardly tied back, and she was dressed in a T-shirt and shorts without any apparent makeup or accessories.

"My name's Ursula. What's yours?"

"…Sylvia. Sylvia Lyyneheym."

"Hmm, that's a nice name. Ah, I've got some cookies. Please."

The older woman handed her a small paper bag she had left near the fire, filled with simple fire-baked cookies. Sylvia took a bite of one. It went well with the sweet coffee.

"Um… Where are you from, Ursula?"

“Where am I from…? Hmm, I was born in a place north of here, but I’ve been traveling around so long now, it’s hard to really say. West, east, south, wherever I feel like going.”

“Traveling…? By yourself?”

“Yep. Wherever my fancy takes me,” Ursula answered cheerfully.

For the young Sylvia, that was all but unbelievable.

“Isn’t that dangerous…?”

She had never even left her hometown and didn’t know much about the world outside, but she could easily imagine the dangers a young girl traveling alone might face.

“Well, it would be a lie to say I’ve never found myself in a spot of bother, but I am a Genestella, after all.”

“Ah…I thought so.”

Somehow, Sylvia had known that from the moment she had first seen her.

Having never met another Genestella before, she hadn’t been able to pin down the feeling. But she knew.

“You are, too, right?” Ursula asked.

“…Yes,” Sylvia whispered. It wasn’t something she was proud of.

“Hmm…” Having seen her reaction, Ursula clapped her hands together and changed the subject. “Well then, Sylvia, let’s hear it.”

“Huh…?”

“You came here because you wanted something from me, no?”

Sylvia looked away, abashed at being asked so directly.

But it was true, she *had* come for a reason.

“…Y-your song.”

“Oh?”

“Y-your song… It was…so…s-so beautiful…!” Sylvia only barely managed to squeeze the words out.

At this, Ursula’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “Ah, I see… Ha, I’m honored.” A truly heartfelt smile rose to her lips, and for the first time, she really did look as young as her years.

As she watched Ursula scratch at her cheeks in embarrassment, Sylvia finally felt a sense of familiarity with her.

“What was it called? That song you sang when you were waiting out the rain?”

It was because of that unforgettable song she heard on that rainy day that the reluctant and shy Sylvia had brought herself

here.

“Hmm… Sorry, I don’t really remember,” Ursula answered, looking troubled.

“Huh?”

“I’m always humming things, even without realizing it. So I don’t really know what it was… Sorry.”

“Oh…” Sylvia’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.

That nostalgic, intense melody. A clear rhythm that shook her heart and touched her soul.

She had come here wanting to hear it once more, and yet…

Not wanting to give up, Sylvia breathed a deep sigh, dived deep into her memories, and opened her mouth.

“

abilities haven't…"

Ursula sank deep into thought before finally fixing her with a gentle yet serious gaze.

"Wh-what…?"

"Sylvia, how would you like it if I taught you to sing?"

"Huh?!"

Sylvia jumped at the unexpected development.

"I—I… It's not like I've ever wanted to be a singer or anything…"

That was the truth. All she wanted was to hear that song again.

"Well, I won't force you. But you know…I think you have the potential to do a great many things, and there's not much capable of holding you back. I mean, I'm strong enough to travel around by myself, and it's thanks to my singing that I met you."

"A great many things…?" Sylvia repeated the words, wondering what possibilities lay before her.

She was always locked away in her room, reading books, and of course going to church with her parents… She helped around the house a little, too, but none of it was anything that she alone could do.

"Your voice is very beautiful and has a ring to it that can touch people's hearts. I'm sure you could spin some wonderful songs."

"…Really?"

Sylvia stared back, unsure what else to say. This was the first time anyone had ever said anything like that to her.

"Yep, really. You might even become a great diva one day."

Ursula was of course merely trying to encourage her, but the sincerity of her words moved Sylvia in spite of her inherent timidity.

"A-all right…! Please teach me, Miss Ursula…!"

After that, over the short summer Ursula was in town, Sylvia went to visit her daily and learned more than just how to sing. For Sylvia, who had lived her whole life in this small town, the older woman's stories of the world outside were particularly engrossing.

"One day, I want to travel around like you do," she said, and so Ursula taught her how to protect herself, too.

She taught her how to handle Luxes and manipulate her prana, trained her in how to move and exercise her body—and while they were together no more than two months, it was undoubtedly the

busiest period in Sylvia's life.

Soon afterward, Ursula left town to continue on her travels, but the two kept in touch over their mobiles, speaking often. And when Sylvia finally awoke as a Strega, it was Ursula who gave her the most helpful advice.

Sylvia continued to learn by herself, to train, and to grow.

This shy and withdrawn child soon evolved into a cheerful and assertive young lady.

This continued for several years, until—

"Actually, I've been invited to go to Asterisk… Yep, that's right. I guess I've been scouted. I'm a bit surprised they decided to choose someone as clumsy as me. But you know, I *do* want to go there."

That was the last time Sylvia had ever spoken with Ursula. Shortly after this conversation, she lost contact with her completely.

She did everything she could think of to try and locate her mentor, but no matter how far she had grown, even as a Strega, there was only so much a young girl in the middle of the countryside could hope to accomplish.

And that was when Petra Kivilehto of Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies showed up.

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"…I was lying when I said I'd forgotten it," Sylvia muttered under her breath as she walked down the pathway onto the stage.

Looking back, she believed the melody she had sung that day—at least as far she could remember—hadn't been that far off from what she had heard.

Since entering Queenvale, she had searched through every database of music from around the world she could find, but she still hadn't been able to identify the song Ursula had hummed on that rainy day—which meant it probably wasn't an existing melody but rather one of Ursula's own creations.

"I don't know why I lied back then, but I still haven't given up."

She wanted to hear that song once more.

She wanted to meet her friend once more.

That was why she had come to Asterisk.

Before she knew it, simply by doing everything she could in pursuit of those goals, she realized the world had begun to think of her as a diva. She had become the school's highest-ranked fighter, its student council president; she had made beloved friends and met cute juniors; and she had encountered the first person whom she had ever truly fallen in love with.

And of course, an opponent whom she had to defeat.

All thanks to Ursula.

That was why she had to reach her, reach past the Orga Lux that had usurped her body.

And precisely as Ursula had said, it would be through song that she would do so.

"Here she is! Coming out of the east gate, our very own diva, the world's top idol, Queenvale's number one, and runner-up of the last Lindvolus! The great Sigrdrífa, Sylvia Lyyneheym!"

Sylvia began to cross the bridge just as Christie Baudouin's enthusiastic commentary filled the stadium.

The dazzling lights, the excited crowds, the whirlwind of cheers, the unknown thousands watching her every move—Sylvia was more than familiar with it all by now. Rather, what had a cold chill running down her spine was her opponent already waiting across the stage.

Orphelia Landlufen.

Le Wolfe Black Institute's top-ranked fighter and two-time champion of the Lindvolus.

The Witch of Solitary Venom—who had defeated Sylvia in the championship match of the tournament last time.

"All right, then." With a flourish, Sylvia leaped off the bridge, landing dramatically in front of her opponent. "Long time no see, Orphelia."

"…"

Orphelia, however, didn't react to her greeting.

As usual, her expression was ephemeral and sorrowful, her appearance as quiet as the depth of night.

"Ah, you're still as cold as ever…," Sylvia said, turning toward her starting position, when—

"Sylvia Lyyneheym," Orphelia called out behind her.

She turned back, only to find that her opponent now looked somehow colder still, her voice inexplicably forlorn.

"Your fate was strong when we fought last time, even against mine. I wonder whether you've been able to strengthen it further… I hope so."

"Eh… You don't look particularly geared up, though?"

Actually, now that she thought about it, Orphelia had been on the back foot during the fifth round, albeit only for a short time, in a way she never had been before. She may have won in the end, but she had seemed uncharacteristically angry. For Sylvia, that had left a lasting impression. Maybe that heat was still there?

No, unless—

"The rematch we've waited three years for! Who will triumph? Our reigning champion or the world's favorite diva?! It's time to find out!"

The two opponents continued to glare at each other, until to the sound of Christie's voice over the loudspeakers, Sylvia broke her opponent's gaze, returning to her position.

She activated her Orga Lux, the Fólkvangr, just as Orphelia

activated hers, the Gravisheath.

“Lindvolus Quarterfinals, Match 2—begin!”

And so the match got underway.

“It’s hollow heart so cold, so cold, melting everything away, glimmering in the depths of the dark, the dark night sky…”

With the raising of the curtain, a heavy bass began to shake the earth around her, spreading out across the stage. The mana around her started to react, swirling together around her.

“The brilliance of a black star, drawing everything in, I’m falling, falling…”

“Here we go! Sylvia’s first song! What does this versatile Strega, whose melodies can control all manner of phenomena, have in store now? But wait… Her song’s a little different than usual, don’t you think? Dark and moody…”

“Indeed, Contestant Lyyneheym’s songs are typically elegant and moving. This one, though… It’s closer to an opera, maybe?”

It wasn’t only the announcer and commentator who were abuzz—the audience was stirring, too.

There weren’t many songs in Sylvia’s repertoire with as slow a tempo and as low a register as this one. That wasn’t due to omission (in fact, as a diva, she was familiar with all genres) but simply because such melodies were usually ill-suited to the battlefield. Her abilities were delicate, and if she were to lose her concentration or hit the wrong pitch, they would quickly lose their effect. However, when necessary, that problem could be overcome with enough effort.

Like now.

“Kur nu Gia.”

But, of course, Orphelia wasn’t about to just stand by idly while she made her preparations. No matter how powerful or weak they were, she would slaughter them all with equal ruthlessness. And so it was here. The miasma rising from her feet took the form of a gigantic, sinewy arm, bearing down on Sylvia in an attempt to knock her off her feet.

She took a step backward to dodge it, but in that instant, a second and then a third arm had already emerged from beneath her opponent’s feet.

“Fallen stars out there beyond, held captive for everlasting eternity!”

Just before those tendrils of miasma could reach her, however, her ability activated.

No sooner did several jet-black spheres appear around her than they sucked Orphelia’s miasma inside and extinguished it.

“Wh-what’s this?! Those black balls protecting Sylvia absorbed Orphelia’s poison!”

“Amazing. They kind of look like miniature black holes.”

Sylvia summoned a dozen of those black spheres—hollow stars, as she liked to call them—each of varying sizes, deploying them around her to defend herself. The largest one was a little over three feet in diameter, the smallest around the size of her fist.

In their previous face-off, she had tried to use a barrier of wind to hold Orphelia’s miasma at bay, but to her chagrin, she had been overpowered. She had based these hollow stars on that experience, fashioned specifically for this opponent and designed to absorb and destroy practically anything.

Nonetheless, when fighting Orphelia, sticking to defense would mean inevitable destruction. It was, of course, necessary to have a countermeasure against her poison, but she understood fully that devoting her resources exclusively to defense would only come back to hurt her later.

Which was where these hollow stars came in.

“Go!” she called out, shooting three of the black orbs toward her foe.

At the same time, the arms of miasma that approached her were consumed by her defensive stars.

“…”

Orphelia easily dodged the projectiles with minimal movement, but Sylvia adjusted their trajectory. The first grazed her snow-white hair before gouging a deep gash in the bottom of the stage and circling around again. Where everything that those hollow stars consumed disappeared to, not even Sylvia knew.

And she wasted no time before moving on to her next number.

“Let’s tear down our walls; let’s surpass ourselves! No begrudging our wounds, run, run!”

This was one of her standard acts used to strengthen her physical abilities.

There was no mistaking the increased power gushing up inside her from the simple yet intense rhythm.

Without this, she wouldn't stand a chance engaging Orphelia in close combat.

"…What a nuisance," Orphelia whispered, and with a wave of her hand and a flicker of the Gravisheath, she cut right through the spheres buzzing around her.

Oh dear… I was afraid that might work.

While the hollow stars might have been capable of absorbing just about anything, they were still nonetheless the product of a Strega's abilities. They wouldn't hold up, it seemed, against an Orga Lux.

Orphelia breathed a resigned sigh and readied the Gravisheath.

The next moment, a series of dark purple orbs emanated from her. To the naked eye, they closely resembled Sylvia's own hollow stars, but these were spheres of concentrated gravity, capable of crushing anything they came into direct contact with.

And their number was staggering.

Hey… Hold on…

They continued to materialize, one after the other, more than a hundred of them in total. Sylvia's heart wavered with apprehension. The Gravisheath's previous user, Irene Urzaiz, had been able to use a similar technique but only after letting the Orga Lux feed on her younger sister's blood. How on earth was it capable of doing this without sustenance?

"…Go."

And with Orphelia's soft-voiced command, countless of those spheres launched right toward her.

Whoa…!

With this development, she had no other option but to focus on evasion. Her own hollow stars would serve as no defense against something produced by an Orga Lux.

She ran across the stage, diving and sliding away from the rain of projectiles. If she hadn't boosted her body, she probably wouldn't have succeeded.

"—I'll go to you in an instant! Leaping across sky, stars, and space!"

She couldn't forget to continue on with her next number, a pop song, bright and lively in her usual style.

But just when she thought she had dodged those gravitational spheres, she found herself suddenly slammed against the ground. No doubt the Gravisheath had drastically increased the power of the

gravity over her position.

"If that's how you want to do this…! *To the depths of that fortress of thorns, I won't make you wait any longer!*"

Despite the pressure holding her down, causing her to momentarily lose her voice, she continued to sing without any more interruption.

Damn, everything's going blurry… Tch, again?!

Orphelia had deployed a new volley of gravitational spheres, aimed right for where Sylvia was pinned to the ground.

"This looks bad! Sylvia can't run or defend!"

"It looks like she's being held down by an area effect of increased gravity, preventing her from fleeing. This may be over quickly."

Orphelia mercilessly swung the Gravisheath, releasing those purple-black orbs all at once.

But then—

"Huh?!"

"Eh?!"

—in the next instant, Sylvia rose to her feet, *behind* her opponent.

"…!"

Orphelia, detecting her instantly, swung the Gravisheath backward, but Sylvia scrambled to the side, lashing out with the Fólkvangr. Her target, of course, was the school crest on her opponent's chest.

Nonetheless, Orphelia caught the attack in her left hand. It was only thanks to her infinite prana that she was able to catch the weapon with her bare hand.

Argh! Maybe it was a mistake to come so close?!

Sylvia bit her lip, jumping backward just in time to dodge a tendril of miasma that gushed up from her opponent's feet.

"Wh-what's this?! What's going on here?! Sylvia was over there, and now she's…"

"It can't be…"

"…Teleportation," Orphelia murmured, as if to finish the commentator's sentence.

Yes. The second countermeasure that Sylvia had prepared for this fight against Orphelia was instantaneous movement.

So long as she could perceive where she wanted to go, she could ignore any and all obstacles and appear there in an instant. She had missed a beat in her song this time and so had missed her

target slightly; otherwise, her last attack may very well have ended the match then and there.

…Well, that might be a bit too optimistic. Orphelia's reaction speed is extraordinary.

Orphelia had fought against opponents with teleportation abilities before. That was no doubt why she had been able to respond so quickly. But even so, the speed of her reaction was impressive.

"Amazing! Incredible! Teleportation! To think that Sylvia had been hiding this all along!"

"Contestant Lyyneheym certainly is a highly versatile Strega. Considering that Contestant Landlufen specializes exclusively in poison abilities, I guess you could call this a showdown between versatility and specialization."

Right. Sylvia's abilities certainly could be called versatile.

After all, she was a Strega whose songs could create practically anything.

It was no doubt those words that Ursula had said to her that day, inscribed deep in her heart, that gave her the strength to do it.

There *was* a lot that she could do and not much that could hold her back.

"Now then, time for the next song." Sylvia took a deep breath, carefully monitoring her opponent's movements.

"My irreplaceable friend, held captive by fate, your savior is here!"

She sung the words rousingly, echoing across the stage.

This song was the third and final weapon she had prepared for Orphelia.

"Over towering walls, through hidden doors, past impenetrable cages…"

At the same time, it was a song that she had filled with hope for her precious friends.

"…I'll break them down, I'll tear through. You can count on me!"

The lyrics were simple and direct—or, if one were to be less charitable, somewhat hackneyed. But that was why their effect was so easy to understand.

It bolstered her attack power.

A huge quantity of mana and glowing light began to swirl around the Fólkvangr, dazzlingly bright.

Even if it wasn't an Orga Lux, her weapon was close enough in power in its current state. She had concentrated as much mana as

she could into a single point, and while the cost to her prana was considerable, her preparations were now complete.

Then, uncharacteristically, Orphelia spoke up. “What an unpleasant song,” she murmured.

Her face was downcast and shrouded in shadow, concealing her expression.

Nonetheless, it was obvious from her bearing and aura that this wasn’t her usual self.

“Disappear…” When Orphelia looked up, she fixed Sylvia with a deadly gaze, and with a swipe of the Gravisheath, she summoned up another volley of dark spheres.

“Come with me; let’s return to those days that we passed together!”

The spheres came flying toward Sylvia in even greater number than before, but now they were easily dodged.

Measuring her timing as she evaded the projectiles, Sylvia again teleported behind her opponent.

“You’re repeating yourself…”

Orphelia, it seemed, had read her moves, immediately unleashing another tendril of miasma.

This time, however, it was Sylvia’s turn to read her. She teleported once more, this time appearing above her opponent’s head.

“…!”

Orphelia’s response was delayed for a brief moment, giving Sylvia all the time she needed to deliver a blow piercing her opponent’s prana defenses and shallowly digging into her shoulder.

Yes, I got through…!

In its current state, the Fólkvangr could indeed break through Orphelia’s defenses. Perhaps for the first time, Sylvia now had a real chance at victory.

“Whoa! It’s finally happened! Sylvia has managed to wound Orphelia!”

“Incredible! This has to be the first time Contestant Landlufen has ever been injured in a match!”

Sylvia flowed into the second verse, maintaining her readiness as she teleported back to a safe distance.

“I’ll tear them open; I’ll break them down; whatever I need to grasp your hand!”

“That song…is a real nuisance…!” Orphelia groaned, covering her face with her left hand, as if in terrible pain.

Dozens of plumes of miasma flew again toward Sylvia, but their movements, like those of the gravitational spheres, lacked variation and were easily evaded.

So there is *something wrong with her…?*

Orphelia was certainly acting strangely.

But in that case, this was a one-in-a-million chance.

Sylvia tightened her grip on the Fólkvangr, feeding more power into it.

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Large air-window viewing screens were deployed all throughout the city of Asterisk during the Festa, broadcasting the tournament in real time for the benefit of the general public.

After all, it wasn't easy to obtain tickets to attend in person, and the prices had soared to astronomical heights for the widely anticipated matches of the main tournament. Not only that but the Lindvolus was widely considered the most exciting of the three Festa tournaments. Ordinary people—anyone outside of the wealthiest, in fact—were left with no choice but to watch via the live broadcast or hope to win a ticket in the lottery.

Nonetheless, the girl was happy just to be able to watch it. Even if the broadcast was exactly the same, it *felt* different watching it out here than it did back at home.

The real-life flesh-and-blood Sylvia Lyyneheym was fighting not even a fifth of a mile away. That fact alone filled the girl with incredible excitement. Even the other spectators, who had come all the way to Asterisk despite not being able to enter the venue in person, were filled with the same fervor, raising their voices in cheers and curses all around her.

The girl was one of Sylvia's many fans. At first, she had been enchanted by her voice, but she soon came to appreciate her dignified fighting style, too.

The girl was also a Genestella and dreamed of one day enrolling at Queenvale. That was why her parents had brought her to Asterisk today. As it happened, they were fans of Sylvia, too, and were cheering her on as well.

Ah, Sylvia really is amazing…!

The girl wasn't really familiar with fighting strategies, but even she could tell that Sylvia was pushing Orphelia hard. She might

even succeed in defeating the reigning champion, whom people liked to call the strongest Strega of all time. And those thoughts fed again into her enthusiasm, her cheers further rising in intensity.

But the most wonderful thing right now was undeniably Sylvia's new song.

To the girl, all of Sylvia's songs were as wonderful as the stars glittering in the night sky, but this new one seemed to convey her personal feelings more strongly than most—hot, unwavering, straightforward.

The girl suddenly noticed the figure of a robed woman standing diagonally behind her, seeming to be completely immune to the fervor that had fallen on the other spectators.

As she stared up at the air-window, tears silently trickled down the woman's face.

"Um, er… Are you all right, miss?" the girl called out, offering her a handkerchief.

At first, the girl thought her to be a fan just as moved by Sylvia's performance as she herself was, but that didn't seem to be the case. She was completely expressionless, and yet tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"What is this…?" The woman glanced down at the proffered handkerchief, tilting her head quizzically.

"Huh? Uh, er, I mean, you were crying, so…"

Only then, when she raised a hand to her face, did the woman seem to realize it. "Tears…? Impossible, this body's consciousness should be completely dormant…"

The girl didn't know what the woman was talking about. Her attention had been caught by the large necklace she glimpsed under the woman's robe. It was a mechanical design and somehow unsettling to look at…

The audience suddenly erupted in a massive cheer, and when the girl glanced toward the air-window overhead, she saw that the match's pace was quickening again.

But when she turned back around, the robed woman had vanished.

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"Whoa! Seriously? Seriously?! Is this really happening?! Is Orphelia, Erenshkigal, the strongest champion in the Festa's history, really on the

verge of defeat?!"

"Contestant Landlufen is reacting well against her opponent's teleportation technique, but she's fighting purely on the defense. You would think that she would try to go on the offense now that Contestant Lyyneheym has broken through her defenses, but it doesn't look like she can find an opening… The situation does look bad for her."

Needless to say, Sylvia had no intention of letting up on her attacks nor was she about to give her opponent an opportunity to counter. She kept teleporting from one place to another, launching into one hit-and-run strike followed by the next, whittling Orphelia down little by little.

Yes, one of her targets here was her opponent's physical stamina.

"Haah…" Orphelia, narrowly dodging Sylvia's next attack, let out a deep sigh.

It was only her first strike that had actually managed to wound her opponent, with Orphelia successfully evading the continuing assault. Nonetheless, her breathing was growing ragged.

Her most obvious weakness, laid bare in her previous match against Hilda, was precisely that—her ability to sustain a fight. Sylvia had long known that her opponent's overpowering abilities were consuming her from within, but until now, no one had been able to take advantage of that fact. After all, no one had been able to withstand her attacks before. Not even Hilda, whose abilities seemed to almost equal her own.

Orphelia had clearly lost her rhythm. Sylvia's hollow stars were consuming her tendrils of miasma, and Ophelia's gravitational spheres were failing to reach their mark.

If they kept this up, it wouldn't be long before Sylvia's blade reached its target or Orphelia's body itself gave way.

However, Sylvia knew it wouldn't be quite that easy.

"Yes… I'll admit it. Your fate is strong… But you know…I hate it. Oh, why…? Why does that song make my heart ache like this…?" Orphelia Landlufen, who hardly ever showed any emotion other than resignation and grief, glared bitterly at Sylvia. "Fine. Then it can all sink together…" As she all but spat out those words, she plunged the Gravisheath into the ground below her, funneling prana from her own body into the Orga Lux.

By the looks of it, she was preparing to unleash the same torrent of miasma she had employed against Hilda, quickly

unfolding into thousands of treelike structures.

Now's my chance…!

Sylvia had been waiting for this—a time when her opponent would have to recover by relying on a large-scale technique such as this one.

However, it would take time for Orphelia to channel her own abilities through the Orga Lux to generate the oncoming labyrinth of miasma.

Sylvia switched her Fólkvangr to its gun mode, and at the same instant, she unleashed her Meteor Arts. Those movements, timed to perfection, were a step faster than Orphelia's.

"Guh…!"

A bullet of light, strengthened by both Sylvia's enhanced power and her use of Meteor Arts, flew straight for its target—and while Orphelia managed to use the Gravisheath to deflect it, the Orga Lux, perhaps unable to withstand the impact, was sent flying from her hand.

"I've got you—!"

Raising her voice as she approached the end of her power-increasing song, Sylvia concentrated her remaining prana and teleported across the stage.

She materialized before her distressed opponent, then behind her, then to her left and right—appearing and disappearing in rapid succession.

"Tch!"

From Orphelia's perspective, it must have looked as if she were in all five places at once.

And then—

"Yaaaaaahhhhhh!"

—Sylvia, deciding on her target, boldly appeared before her.

Returning the Fólkvangr to its blade mode, she lunged straight for her opponent's chest with all her strength.

"…!"

In the championship match of the previous Lindvolus, Sylvia had been one step away from breaking her opponent's school crest. But before she could snatch victory, Orphelia had swept away her barrage of projectiles with her bare hand.

Once more, Sylvia's opponent tried to block the strike with her hands, folding them both over her school crest.

Nonetheless, the fully charged Fólkvangr was apparently

stronger than those prana-reinforced extremities, piercing right through them.

Victory…!

This was it; she was sure of it. With how deep her blade had pierced her opponent, she *had* to have broken her crest.

But the automated voice that she was expecting didn't ring out.

"Heh… Heh-heh…" Orphelia let out a sinister chuckle.

It was a self-deprecating sound, cold and deadly.

"To think… I never even suspected that I still had some left."

From beneath her hands bright red blood gushed forth, sputtering down onto the ground.

And as she watched, Sylvia finally understood.

Her attack *had* cut through her opponent's hands. There was no questioning that.

Orphelia's blood, however, had melted away the blade of the Fólkvangr.

And not just the blade—her blood was consuming even the body of the Lux.

Panicking, Sylvia cast the weapon away, leaping backward to escape.

"No, no, how can that even be possible…? It's like the story of Grendel…"

Orphelia's blood, it seemed, was no different from that of the creature's mother that appeared in the old epic tale *Beowulf*. In that story, too, the sword used to behead her had melted away.

"My fate is— No, this is enough. There's no hope."

Orphelia's voice, Sylvia realized, had returned to normal—the epitome of sadness, resignation, and despair.

"Yes… In the end, the only option open to me is to live with this cursed blood. Yes, yes, it's been a long time since my blood has flowed like this. But you've helped me remember, Sylvia Lyyneheym…"

"You know, you shouldn't think so little of yourself… It's an insult to everyone who's lost against you," Sylvia quipped as she activated her spare Lux.

She didn't have much prana left, but her song was still having an effect.

I can still fight…!

Armed with fresh determination, she readied her weapon.

"My blood ties me to the seven gates of hell… Once opened, there can be no turning back."

Orphelia, on the other hand, didn't so much as glance toward the Gravisheath, still lying where it had fallen. She merely held out her right hand, letting the blood gush onto the ground at her feet. The red liquid seethed and burned, and a white *something* began to emerge…

That *something* suddenly soared into the air before circling around Orphelia. It looked human at first glance, but what it most resembled was a ghost from an old horror story. And it wasn't alone. Another one, then another, rose up from the pool of blood and began flying across the stage of their own accord.

"No…"

"I should warn you. These spirits are born from an incredibly dense miasma. A single touch is all they need to rob you of life."

"What?! You can't mean…?!"

But Orphelia finished her sentence for her: "You'll die."

She didn't seem to be joking.

There were more phantoms than Sylvia could count soaring above her now, but they still continued to emerge—as that pool of blood continued to grow in size with each passing second, more and more of them kept appearing, the frequency only increasing.

The phantoms' own speeds were increasing, too, and while Sylvia tried desperately to hold them at bay with her hollow stars, they were simply too numerous, their trajectories too unpredictable.

At this rate…!

"Ersetu la Târi."

No sooner did Orphelia's austere, solemn voice ring out than the pool of blood erupted with explosive force, and yet more phantoms poured forth.

"Wha—?! More of them…?!"

The stage had practically been transformed into an ethereal otherworld inhabited by a raging tempest of ghostly apparitions.

It was only thanks to her teleportation ability and her hollow stars that Sylvia was able to stave them off, but it was clear the situation was now completely out of control.

And then one phantom somehow slipped in from behind, heading straight for her.

“…!”

A sudden chill washed over her as if she had been doused in icy water, and she felt as her heart made one final desperate beat before stopping still. She could feel herself falling into darkness, her energy seeping out.

And so Sylvia collapsed in the middle of the stage. The last thing she remembered seeing was that seething mass of specters, and in their center, Orphelia’s crimson eyes staring down at her.

*

"…Gagh! *Koff, koff!*"

Coughing violently as she awoke, Sylvia shot up in her bed, tearing away the respirator attached to her face.

"That was quick, Sylvia." Petra, sitting beside her, looked relieved.

"Where am I…?"

Glancing around, Sylvia saw she was surrounded by medical equipment. She was lying on a stretcher surrounded by several paramedics. She seemed to be in an ambulance.

"You went into cardiac arrest, but the medics resuscitated you immediately," Petra answered. "We're on our way to the hospital so a doctor can check you."

That was enough for Sylvia to understand what had happened.

"I see… So I lost. Again."

Strangely, she felt no sense of fear or shock to hear that she had been on the verge of death. The medical staff assembled at the tournament venues were the best in the field and no doubt would have been able to revive even Orphelia were her heart to stop beating during the course of the match.

"Just be grateful that you're still with us. When you collapsed, I thought *my* heart was going to stop."

"Ah… Sorry, Petra. I made you worry, huh?" Sylvia apologized.

Looking through her visor, Petra stared deep into her eyes. "Listen to me, Sylvia. I'll never forgive you if you try anything like that again. The second you think your life is in danger, give up the match. Do you understand me?"

"Yeees," she answered glumly.

She would normally stand up for herself in this kind of situation, but here, now, she decided to go along with her elder's wishes.

"Ah…" Petra raised a hand to her temple.

"But you know, she's strong… Yep, really strong," Sylvia said, clenching her fists.

It was a complete and utter defeat. In the end, all her countermeasures had amounted to nothing. It was so frustrating.

And this was the second time she had been forced to endure this regret… No—this time was even worse than when she had lost at the last Lindvolus.

"Ah, right. I have a message for you," Petra said warmly, no doubt trying to console her despondent protégée.

"Huh? From Ayato?"

"I think he's been trying to call you on your mobile. You can check on him later."

"Oh? From who, then?"

"Neithnefer."

Sylvia blinked in surprise at the unexpected name. Neithnefer was Queenvale's second-ranked fighter and had lost against her in their fifth-round match to decide who would face Orphelia.

Apparently, she didn't like Sylvia very much, but she had promised to watch the match, so it probably had something to do with that.

"*'It might not have been much, but your song made a small wave in her heart. Be proud of yourself.'* That was her message."

"Heh."

This was a pleasant surprise. Sylvia had been preparing herself for harsh criticism.

"I would say that's her way of acknowledging you."

"I hope so," Sylvia answered with a small smile.

Her defeat was truly disappointing.

It was disappointing, but there was more to it than that.

She lay back down on her stretcher and closed her eyes to get some rest.

Right, I'm going to have to change my approach starting tomorrow.

There were still a great many things she could do.

So many things to see to all at once.

CHAPTER 4
THE QUARTERFINALS III

“Phew… We made it.”

“Naturally.”

Camilla and Saya had been adjusting and readjusting the S-Module in Saya’s prep room at the Procyon Dome right down to the very last minute before the match was due to get underway. Now, having completed their preparations, they flashed each other dauntless grins.

They had been working on their final adjustments to the device since yesterday. There were no matches scheduled during that time, so they had ample opportunity to perfect it. And now, thanks to their efforts, they had fully repaired the damage that her Luxes had sustained in the fifth round.

“In any case, this should greatly increase the stability of the S-Module. It should also ease the burden on its user.” Camilla squeezed Saya’s shoulder and disconnected the wiring leading to the device’s manadite core.

“…Thanks again. I could never have perfected it alone.”

Saya had prepared two trump cards for the Lindvolus. The first she had created with the help of her colleagues from the Society for the Study of Meteoric Engineering and her father, Souichi, but she had designed and built the S-Module entirely by herself. Seidoukan Academy might have provided her with her own private research lab, but still, doing it all alone was somewhat excessive.

“Well then, shall we say this settles our debt?”

“I didn’t think we had a debt… But fine, if that makes you feel better.”

“Very good.” Camilla nodded with satisfaction, handing her the S-Module’s activation body. “Now then, do your best. I’m sure you know this, but Lenaty is *strong*, got it?”

“I know.”

From having watched Lenaty’s match against Rimcy alone, Saya knew her chances of victory here would be slim.

Or rather, it was probably fair to say she was the weakest contestant remaining in the top eight. No matter who she fought, it would be a positively grueling match.

Nonetheless, she had no intention of losing.

“Me and my dad’s Luxes are invincible. I’m just going to prove that,” she said as she wrapped the S-Module’s activation body around her waist.

Rimcy, until now standing by the wall, stepped forward, her head lowered. “Lenaty is in your hands, Saya Sasamiya. She is still growing and has the potential to become angel or demon. But if through this fight, she could discover herself, as Ardy and I did—”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Saya interrupted, cutting her off.

She had already heard from Camilla that Lenaty wasn’t under Ernesta’s control. From Saya’s point of view, that was an incredible abdication of responsibility, not to mention an unbelievable lapse in judgment. She was basically letting an autonomous puppet with greater destructive power than most Page Ones run completely loose.

That, however, was a problem for Ernesta—or perhaps for Allekant Académie. It wasn’t any of her business… Or rather, it shouldn’t have been.

“Nevertheless, she is rather impertinent. If you are firm with her, if you show her some discipline, it will do her good,” Rimcy said with a laugh, her cold visage softening somewhat as she bowed her head once more.

“Well then, it’s time,” Saya said, picking up the activation body of her completed Lux from the corner of the room.

It was heavy, but that weight was proof of its exceptional specs.

“…I know it’s a little late for this, but are you really going to take that with you?”

“Naturally.”

Why was she bringing this up *now*? Saya wondered.

Camilla might not have been directly involved in the Lux’s

development, but Saya had given her a general overview of its design and capabilities. She chuckled at the memory of just how stunned Camilla's expression had been upon realizing what it was.

"I can't beat that kid without it."

"Of course, I understand that. I mean, are you sure, in its current configuration…? No, don't worry about it. I shouldn't be questioning you." Camilla gave up, shaking her head slightly. "Here's to your courage, Saya Sasamiya. I may be affiliated with Allekant, but best of luck."

"Yep." Saya gave Camilla and Rimcy a thumbs-up before calmly making her way toward the stage, a leisurely briskness to her step.

*

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh my God, seriously?! I can't stop laughing! Ha! Ha-ha-ha! It's glorious! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"C-calm down, Chitose…! Pff! Y-you're going overboard here…! Pffta-ha-ha!"

Down on the stage, Saya puffed her cheeks in indignation at the uncontrollable laughter of the commentator, Chitose Sakon, and the announcer, Nana Andersen.

"Errrg…"

"I know, but she's brought a backpack! A backpack*! To the quarterfinals of the Lindvolus! And I mean, look how adorable she is with it! Pah…! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"*

Maybe so.

Maybe the activator she was wearing strapped to her back *did* look at first glance like a child's schoolbag.

But it *wasn't*. The activator was simply designed to be efficient and easy to carry, nothing more.

"And they call this commentary…? Disgraceful."

Thinking back on it, Chitose and Nana had also been responsible for the commentary two years ago when she and Kirin had first fought in the Phoenix. Those two had been an unpleasant duo back then, too, and now she found herself liking them even less.

And it wasn't only them—the audience seemed to be laughing just as heartily.

The spectators seemed so amused that it was hard to imagine the match was about to begin. Given the spectacle that was Sylvia's

match against Orphelia just a short time ago—even if it was in another venue—and the fact that it had ended with Sylvia having a heart attack, Saya would have expected the announcers to be a little more apprehensive and muted, but there was no sign of that at all.

"Hey, hey, why is everyone laughing?" Lenaty, her opponent, asked as she approached, her expression quizzical.

And after watching her fifth-round match at the Canopus Dome, Saya had assumed it would be Lenaty who would find the device most amusing.

"That backpack, it's so cute! Lena wants it! Hey, can I have it? Please?"

"…No."

"Eh! Cheapskate! It would suit Lena more!"

As she watched her opponent sulk, Saya found that she understood exactly what Rimcy had meant a short while ago.

For Lenaty, nothing was more important than her feelings. She wanted to have fun, to get her hands on whatever she liked, and she truly hated the things that she hated. She was completely driven by her whims.

According to Camilla, Lenaty had gleefully pulled Ardy's arms right out of their sockets in a mock battle at their first meeting. And Saya believed it. Even if her opponent had been a human being rather than an autonomous puppet, Lenaty had that level of selfish innocence about her.

I see… She really is just a kid.

It wasn't that she lacked reason but rather she lacked the comprehension that came along with it.

At the same time, as she sized up the girl standing in front of her, Saya felt as if she herself could see the ideals that Ernesta had made reality in this autonomous puppet.

I guess this means Ernesta Kühne was right. I hate to admit it, but there you go…

Saya breathed out a resigned sigh and called out to Lenaty: "Hey, kid!"

"Come on! Stop calling Lena a kid!"

"Oh? Lena, then."

"What…?" Lena stared back wide-eyed, as if taken by surprise that her request had been granted.

"I'm Saya Sasamiya. Remember that."

"Saya Sasamiya? What a funny name!" With a loud guffaw, Lenaty ran back to her designated starting position.

That was probably to be expected.

To Lenaty, Saya was just one more nameless opponent.

But that wouldn't be the case for much longer.

"Lindvolus Quarterfinals, Match 3—begin!"

"All right! Here we go! Wha—?! Ah-ta-ta-ta-ta?!"

No sooner did the automated voice announce the beginning of the match than Lenaty charged toward her, but Saya immediately deployed her type 35 Lux Gatling cannon, Granvaleria, and fired off a rapid barrage of bullets.

Next, she deployed her vernier unit—rebuilt from parts from her type 41 Lux homing blaster, Waldenholt Mark II. Saya's previous match against Violet Weinberg had resulted in considerable damage to her Luxes, and while she had been able to repair the Granvaleria just by changing its barrel, the Waldenholt had been almost completely destroyed, and so she hadn't been able to restore it in time. As such, she had separated the vernier unit so that it could be used independently.

"Aieeeee! Ouch! No fair!"

Lenaty did her best to repel the bombardment with her huge

adjustable glaive-type Lux, the Youdemra, but she couldn't keep up with the assault at four thousand rounds per minute. She threw herself left and right trying to dodge the onslaught, but with Saya tracking her with the Granvaleria, she couldn't break free.

At the same time, Saya used the vernier unit to slide backward across the stage and put some distance between herself and her opponent.

Nonetheless, while the attack seemed to have successfully slowed Lenaty down, it hadn't caused much visible damage. Looking carefully, Saya saw that her opponent seemed to be surrounded by some subtle light, which had caused her bullets to bounce right off her.

Well, I knew this wouldn't be easy just from what she did to Rimcy. I'll need the S-Module to break through that armor.

From what Camilla had told her, Lenaty was powered by several urm-manadite cores working in parallel. It was an ingenious concept, relying not on the special abilities unique to each individual piece of urm-manadite but rather converting their energy into raw power to maximize her specs.

Of course, Camilla's goodwill didn't extend to providing direct data on Saya's opponent, but it was clear that Lenaty's offensive and defensive power, along with her mobility, were beyond compare. Raw strength, heavy armor, and great agility—Lenaty's design was the epitome of the axiom *Simple is best*.

Moreover, her power output was multiplexed using the LOBOS transition method (LTM). Saya didn't need Camilla to tell her that—she could work that out for herself at first glance. After all, it was fair to say that the method was originally the work of Saya and her father. In Lenaty's case, however, the technique was used to channel that explosive power into a defensive coating, giving her almost impossible protection and the ability to fight empty-handed.

It's supposed to be impossible to control urm-manadite using the LOBOS method, though. Even if the cores are irregular, Ernesta keeps performing one miracle after another…

However, Saya found it hard to believe that the technology was as foolproof as that used in Ardy. After all, *she* would have been fine just using the LTM the way it was supposed to be applied. Lenaty's design risked overburdening her urm-manadite cores, possibly even resulting in an explosive runaway cascade.

That being the case, Saya had three strategies at her disposal.

The first was to draw the match to a rapid conclusion before her opponent could employ the LTM. However, that wasn't very realistic if Lenaty could initiate the process at will.

The second was to wait for her to activate it, drag her into a battle of attrition, and wait for her to self-destruct. However, she couldn't be certain that would be the outcome. Also, she wasn't confident she could survive that long.

That was where her third strategy came in—

"I'll crush you with brute force," Saya intoned, activating the Lux on her back.

Nothing happened.

Nonetheless, that was by design, not a malfunction.

At that moment, the Granvaleria, until then roaring as it unleashed its endless volley of projectiles, fell silent. It was a Lux with no limit on its amount of ammunition, so it had probably overheated and burned itself out.

Now then, how was that…?

Her opponent, standing amid a cloud of rising dust, was completely unharmed.

"Whoa… Ha-ha! Look at all that dirt!"

"…So it didn't work."

Her opponent, it seemed, was even more robust than she had thought.

"Oh? Is it over? Argh, that really hurt, you know? But now it's my turn!" Lenaty let out a gleeful laugh and brought the Youdemra about, transforming it into a huge gun and firing off a bombardment of her own.

Saya switched from the Granvaleria to her type 38 Lux grenade launcher, the Helnekraum, and activated the S-Module as she dodged her opponent's barrage.

"And now… *Booooooom!*"

Lenaty joyfully unleashed a bright explosive blast, but Saya, adjusting the S-Module with one hand, deftly avoided it.

"Hmm? What happened?" Lenaty tilted her head to one side, evidently confused as to why her attack hadn't hit.

"What? Is that all you've got?" Saya teased.

Lenaty's face turned red. "Arrrrrgh!"

Contrary to her whimsical behavior, Lenaty had indeed accurately predicted Saya's movements. Nonetheless, this wasn't anything that Saya couldn't outsmart. Her experience fighting

against long-range specialists like Rimcy and Violet gave her a great advantage here. After all, Lenaty's incredible specs were of little use at such a distance.

For the time being, at least.

"Huh?! Why not?! Argh! Tell me, tell me!"

Lenaty may have been wailing in frustration, but to be fair, Saya's projectiles hadn't reached her, either. Saya was confident with her shooting accuracy, but she just couldn't keep up with her opponent's reaction speed.

"Fine! Fine! It's more fun like this anyway!"

With that, Lenaty switched the Youdemra back into its glaive form, and feinting left and right, she rapidly began to close the distance between them. Her agility was astounding. If she managed to get close, Saya would have no way of defending herself.

Fortunately, with her vernier unit fully activated, she was able to fall back to a safe distance.

"Whaaaaat?!"

"Ngh…!"

Saya's bones creaked under the stress of such rapid acceleration, but she had no choice but to endure it. It was a million times better than risking an engagement with her opponent in close combat.

"Whoa! Look how quickly Contestant Sasamiya just shook off Contestant Lenaty!"

"That vernier unit certainly has a lot of power. And she's making good use of it so far. She wouldn't have much chance of winning at her usual speed, so it's a wise choice."

"I see. Lenaty certainly is one of the fastest contestants in the tournament… Hmm? But I guess anyone could use it, no matter how slow they are on their feet! That's one heck of an invention!"

"No, no, it isn't that simple, Nana. Most people would end up crashing into flames if they tried that. The Glühen Rose may have used something similar, but she's a Strega, so her abilities help her to keep control. And in this case, balancing the insane acceleration of that leg-mounted vernier unit with the recoil control of the waist-mounted one doesn't look at all easy. The technology must be incredibly fine-tuned."

Saya didn't like having to admit it, but Chitose Sakon certainly had a good eye. Perhaps that was to be expected of a former student council president at Allekant Académie.

In fact, the only thing Saya had that she could be fully

confident was the best among all remaining contestants in the tournament was her handling of her Luxes. While her design, production, and configuration techniques might not have reached Allekant's level, she could be proud of the fact that she was undoubtedly the most proficient in all of Asterisk at actually employing Luxes in real-life combat.

"Hee-hee! Lena's good at playing tag!" Lenaty, not discouraged in the slightest, followed straight after her, her speed quickly surpassing even the maximum output of Saya's vernier.

"Yahoo! I've got you…"

"—Burst."

Nonetheless, flying in a straight line as she was, Lenaty made an easy target. Saya pulled the trigger of the Helnekraum at the last possible moment, scoring a direct hit that enveloped her opponent in a huge explosion.

"Aieeeee!"

Lenaty was thrown through the air by the impact, but she deftly spun around before making an elegant landing. To Saya's dismay, she didn't appear to have sustained even the slightest damage.

Damn, not even equipping the S-Module to the Helnekraum was enough.

"Yarghhhhh! Lena hates you! Why do you have to be so mean?!" Lenaty glared across the stage at her, clearly upset.

"Saya," she repeated. "I'm Saya Sasamiya."

"Arghhhhh!" Lenaty pouted in frustration as she shifted the Youdemra to a spear configuration.

*

"Saya's quite the go-getter. She's more than a match for that new autonomous puppet, don't you think?" Claudia asked with a relaxed smile. She was clearly impressed.

"…She is now," Ayato answered, sitting beside her.

After his match at the Sirius Dome, Ayato had come to join Claudia in Seidoukan Academy's special viewing lounge at the Procyon Dome to support his classmate. He had originally meant to go and watch Sylvia's bout, but that one started before he had been able to finish his winner's interview and the other formalities. He had been lost for words when he heard she had gone into cardiac arrest, but fortunately she had been quickly resuscitated and was

being treated now at the hospital. Nonetheless, his concerns were only truly allayed when she had contacted him directly just a short time ago.

But as for Saya's match—

"Oh dear, you don't sound very confident."

"You can't have missed it. Saya might have the advantage right now, but she won't be able to keep this up for long."

"Well, now… I suppose you're right," Claudia answered with a short nod and a forced smile.

Lenaty was strong. In terms of raw performance, she was probably on par with Ayato himself or with Xiaohui or Gigoku, while her defense was probably the best of all remaining contestants, surpassing even that of the Black Knight (although technically the Black Knight's abilities had allowed him to withstand even physical shocks). And with her armor powered by urm-manadite, Ayato doubted that even the Ser Veresta would be able to break through it with ease.

Indeed, the only reason why Saya was dominating the battlefield was due to Lenaty's guileless fighting style.

Apart from when she engaged in a processing battle with another autonomous puppet, as she had in her match against Rimcy, Lenaty's behavior was seemingly completely random. It was as if she was only ever thinking about her next move, without ever planning in advance.

From the very beginning of the tournament, nothing she did suggested any form of strategy. She had pulled through the qualifiers using no more than the brute force of her superior specs, and even in her bout with Rimcy, she had performed relatively poorly up until she'd overwhelmed the other puppet with her raw power.

Saya, no doubt having realized that, was making sure Lenaty kept moving in order to prevent her opponent from truly capitalizing on those specifications. She had her experience and preparation to thank for that, but the problem would be Lenaty's *quick learning abilities*.

Ernesta's puppets never fell victim to the same trick twice. That had been the case for Ardy and Rimcy and no doubt applied to Lenaty, too. Even now, it was clear she was continuously adapting to Saya's attack patterns little by little.

"And she still hasn't revealed all her tricks," Ayato noted.

Saya was no doubt on guard against that incredible power output Lenaty had demonstrated at the end of her match with Rimcy, but Ayato couldn't help but wonder whether she would be able to keep it at bay.

"If you're thinking about hidden moves, then Saya still hasn't used her new Lux, has she now? That… Bah!" Claudia snorted, clearly unable to contain her amusement. "Er, sorry. That's what her adorable little backpack is for, isn't it?"

In fact, looking at Saya's current outfit, Ayato couldn't help but remember their childhood elementary school days. Saya had certainly grown up since then, but the innocent impression that she made now was just too strong.

Nonetheless, putting that aside…

"You're probably right… But I've got no idea what it actually is."

Of course, Ayato knew Saya had prepared a new Lux for the Lindvolus, but he still didn't know what it was or how it worked.

At that moment, an air-window suddenly opened up by Claudia's chair, and a computerized voice announced they had visitors.

"Dear me, I wonder who would choose now of all times to stop by…?"

It was normally impossible to visit any of the special viewing lounges assigned to Asterisk's six schools during a match without a prior appointment. Not only would its occupants obviously be focused on that match, but it was also a breach of basic etiquette. Maybe a place as obstinate as Le Wolfe wouldn't care for such niceties, but at Seidoukan— But before Ayato could finish his thought, an unexpected face appeared in the air-window.

He and Claudia exchanged glances before nodding simultaneously and unlocking the door.

"Excuse me."

"S-sorry to interrupt…"

Their visitors were a dumbfounded young blond man and an obviously terrified green-haired girl.

"Yes, come in… And to what do I owe the pleasure of Gallardworth's student council president?" Claudia asked with a warm smile as she went to greet them.

"I apologize for barging in like this. I should have called in advance, but let's just say my mobile hasn't been able to keep a

good connection lately."

"…I see." Claudia's smile underwent an almost imperceptible change in quality.

In other words, it was a confidential matter.

"Well then, come in. Let's talk inside," she said as a huge cheer rose up from the stadium below.

*

"Talk about a close call! One more millimeter and Contestant Sasamiya wouldn't have been able to dodge Contestant Lenaty's attack there!"

Hrng, she's getting better…

From their last exchange, Saya knew that Lenaty was closing in on her.

"Lena's good!" her opponent said with an innocent giggle.

Saya was flying backward across the stage, her vernier engaged to full throttle as she continued to fire at her opponent, moving faster than the naked eye could clearly see.

Lenaty, however, continued to evade that barrage, and with an unstrained expression, she brought her spear down on Saya from above. Saya shifted the injection angle of the vernier at her waist, spinning through the air to dodge the blow. Lenaty nonetheless followed through, her spear piercing deep into the ground.

"Ngh…!"

"Aaand there!"

Saya crouched down, letting a piercing blade of light pass overhead. Suppressing a sudden chill, she reinitiated her vernier and fell back.

If she was being honest with herself, her actions were now guided by pure intuition.

"Whoa! The situation looks to have reversed! Now Contestant Lenaty is hot on the heels of Contestant Sasamiya!"

"Contestant Lenaty is moving like a completely different person to how we saw her at the beginning of the match… Or a different puppet, I suppose. Anyway, she's fighting at a different level now."

"Heh-heh. Are they praising Lena? They are, aren't they?" Lenaty paused her attack for a moment, her expression one of slovenly self-satisfaction as she scratched her head

Saya made use of that opportunity to deactivate the Helnekraum and switch over to her type 39 Lux laser cannon, the

Wolfdora. No matter what she did, the Helnekraum clearly wasn't effective against this opponent.

Lenaty's rate of learning was similar to that of Ardy or Rimcy, but there were some fundamental differences. The two older autonomous puppets probably had their basic parameters (such as close-combat movements and how to operate their weapons) manually configured in advance, using that as a basis they built on with their experience in battle.

Lenaty, on the other hand, didn't appear to be preconfigured in that way—or rather, she probably did possess such data, but from her performance in her processing battle with Rimcy, Saya suspected she was intentionally not using it. In any event, it appeared that Ernesta wanted this autonomous puppet to grow organically from a blank state.

At least, that theory would explain her incoherent and unpredictable movements.

But if she keeps improving, this is going to spiral out of control…

Nonetheless, Saya stifled her growing unease as she equipped the S-Module to the Wolfdora.

"Wow! Awesome! Another Lux!"

"…Fire!"

Saya unleashed an overpowered charge using the S-Module to break out of her critical situation, sending a beam of light carving through the stage.

"Waaaaahhhhh!"

Lenaty threw herself into the air to escape the blast, but Saya raised the barrel of the weapon to pursue her with the beam. Given that Lenaty wasn't equipped with any sort of flight unit, there should have been no avoiding the discharge.

And yet—

"Yippee! Lena's turn!"

"—!"

Lenaty shifted the Youdemra into a large-caliber gun-type Lux, positioned it behind herself, and used its recoil to fling herself in the opposite direction.

Saya quickly raised her weapon, using it as a shield to block her opponent's oncoming kick.

"Guh…!" While she managed to avoid a direct hit, Saya was nonetheless thrown backward across the stage like a stone skipping on water. After hitting the ground twice, then a third time, she

managed to lift herself up after the fourth bounce, preparing herself to meet Lenaty's pursuit.

"Here we go!" Lenaty had already converted the Youdemra back into a huge blade.

"Tch…!" In a bid to lessen the weight of her equipment, Saya cast the Wolfdora aside, holding on to only the S-Module, and took off with her still-deployed vernier. The rapid acceleration sent a dull pain running through her chest. That last kick had probably broken a few ribs. On top of that, her wound from her fifth-round match had broken open, and blood was seeping through her uniform.

The Wolfdora took the brunt of Lenaty's attack in her place, enveloping Saya's vision in a brilliant burst of light as it exploded. She fell back as far as she could, this time activating her type 34 wave cannon, the Ark Van Ders Mark II. If the match had shifted into an all-out fight to the end, then she had no choice but to exhaust all her Luxes.

"Wow! Another Lux! Awesome!" Lenaty, dispersing the explosion with a swing of the Youdemra, looked legitimately impressed.

Lenaty's movements were as innocent as ever, but that didn't stop a wave of trepidation from building in Saya's gut.

Her opponent might still have been acting on her immediate impulses, but she was clearly learning to take the most optimal actions in response to Saya's every move. This wasn't randomness—she was building her move set not on prior data but rather from scratch, based on her own experiences.

In other words, Lenaty had been designed to grow in response to whatever opponent she found herself pitted against.

Ernesta Kühne… You really are a genius.

Saya understood the basic concept. Normally, however, any autonomous puppet designed to work in such a way would lose before it could learn to compete against real fighters. That was no doubt why Ernesta had forgone the unique properties of the urm-manadite cores that powered Lenaty in favor of boosting her basic specifications.

"Yeah! It's time for Lena to get serious!" the girl called out, casting the Youdemra aside and slamming her fist into the palm of her hand.

"What…?!"

At that moment, Lenaty's eyes changed from blue to gold, and the dull light that enveloped her frame swelled brilliantly.

"…Isn't it normal to keep your best move for when you need it?" Saya murmured in disbelief.

She hadn't expected Lenaty to initiate the LOBOS transition method while she was overwhelmingly dominating the field.

"Huh? But Lena's really getting into it now! It'll be fun to take it to the next level!" she declared, puffing out her chest and holding out her finger triumphantly.

"…I see."

In that case, Saya had no choice. They had already been fighting for long enough.

She just needed a *little* longer.

She readied the Ark Van Ders Mark II, preparing herself for what would happen next.

"Tee-hee-hee! Yeah! This will be fun! Seriously!"

And with that, Lenaty took off down the stage, heading straight for her.

Fortunately, her speed was unchanged. It would be close, but Saya could still respond.

I guess she would fall apart if she redirected all that power to her agility.

"Boom!"

A torrent of light burst out from the Ark Van Ders Mark II, intercepting her target, when—

"Ha-ha! How about this?"

Lenaty focused her energy in the palm of her right hand, cutting off the beam of Saya's weapon with a brilliant flash.

"Yep, I thought as much," Saya murmured.

Lenaty had done the exact same thing in her match against Rimcy.

And that was why Saya continued to use the Ark Van Ders Mark II at long range, using her vernier to maintain her distance.

"Ngh! Stop running away…! Ah, right!"

No sooner did Lenaty dodge the next blast of light than she resumed her pursuit, before suddenly stopping as if to reconsider her course of action.

"Right, Lena can do this now!" she said, lifting her right hand into the air. Raw energy gathered in the palm of her hand, forming a small projectile.

“Heave-ho!”

“—!”

With a powerful overarm throw, Lenaty hurled the projectile toward Saya like a blazing fastball.

Saya aimed the Ark Van Ders Mark II in an attempt to intercept it, but Lenaty’s fireball easily scattered her Lux’s beam before scoring a direct hit on its muzzle. She quickly cast the Lux aside but couldn’t stop herself from getting thrown back by the explosion.

“Ugh…!”

She could hardly believe such a small projectile could have outperformed her Ark Van Ders Mark II equipped with the S-Module.

“Let’s go again!”

This time, Lenaty had generated five of those fireballs, hurling them all toward her simultaneously.

Saya pushed her vernier to full throttle, sliding across the stage to avoid the barrage. Nonetheless, when each of those projectiles plummeted into the ground, they sent up a huge cloud of dust.

Meaning…

Just as she feared, Lenaty was making a smoke screen so that she could get close.

“Hee-hee! I’ve got you this time!”

“…That’s my line.”

Lenaty cut through the closest dust cloud in an attack, but Saya made only minimal movements to avoid it. The blow did make contact with her left arm, but Saya had decided in advance that this opportunity was worth that sacrifice.

“Type forty-two Lux pile blaster: Aresbringer.”

And with that, Saya slammed the muzzle of her new Lux right into her opponent’s abdomen.

“Take this! Amagiri Shinmei Style, Sasamiya Swordgun Technique—*Four-Hornet Detonation!*”

“Whaaaaat?!”

A dazzling burst of light and a deafening roar engulfed the two of them.

Lenaty’s small body was sent flying, falling slumped on the far end of the stage.

Saya had last used this ultra-destructive short-range technique to defeat Curtiss Wright in her fourth-round match, but this time she had boosted its firepower with the S-Module.

Not even Lenaty ought to be able to survive this.

And yet—

"Wow, that was a surprise!"

Saya's wishful optimism was quickly shattered.

Lenaty rose to her feet with a skip and a jump, completely unharmed.

Saya was lost for words, frozen in mute astonishment.

"Yahoo! My turn!" Lenaty, of course, hadn't failed to realize her chance. In less than a breath, she leaped back toward Saya.

"Oh no you—!" Saya moved to intercept her with the Aresbringer, but Lenaty merely grabbed the end of the muzzle in her small hand, crushing it completely.

"It's over now!"

Lenaty's right hand shot toward Saya's school crest—but at that moment, Saya pulled the trigger, firing the Aresbringer. With the muzzle destroyed, the consequences were obvious—a tremendous explosion.

"Arghhhhh!"

"Aieeeee!"

The overloaded Lux detonated, sending both Saya and Lenaty flying away from each other.

"Guh…!"

The force of the explosion was completely different than when the Ark Van Ders Mark II had burst into flames. That weapon had simply been destroyed, but the Aresbringer, having lost its outlet for its supercharged energy, ended in a massive detonation. And to make matters worse, Lenaty was probably completely unharmed thanks to her defensive armor, but Saya's whole body was battered.

Her right arm, the part of her body that had been closest to the weapon, was badly lacerated, and the vernier units attached to her waist and legs were completely broken. If not for her prana boosting her resilience, she would in all likelihood be dead.

"Wow, you're crazy!"

As she had expected, Lenaty, her figure emerging from the roiling cloud of dust, was completely unharmed.

"But it's over now! Yep, no one can beat Lena!" her opponent boasted.

"Not yet." Saya's voice was flat. "My school crest is fine, and I can still stand. I'm not giving up."

"…What are you talking about? Come on, look at you! You

can't win like that!" Lenaty shouted angrily.

Saya merely broke into a weak chuckle. "Do you think so?"

At that moment, Saya's backpack released a high-pitched tone. It was ready. Its sub-arm unfolded, encasing her tattered right arm in a small, handgun-like weapon.

"Pfft! What's that supposed to be? What can you do with such a small Lux?"

"You're mistaken. This isn't a Lux. It's just the trigger."

There was little strength left in her arm, but she could still fire the weapon.

All that was left now was to—

"Well, see for yourself."

She leaped high into the air, squeezing her finger with all her strength.

At that moment, the backpack let out a blinding flash that completely enveloped her—and a gigantic Lux appeared out of nowhere.

"Eh…"

"Huh…?"

"What…?"

The announcer, the commentator, Lenaty, even the massed audience—not to mention everyone throughout the world watching the live broadcast—were all completely stupefied by what was happening.

At first glance, the thing that had appeared above the stage resembled nothing short of a UFO. It was disk shaped, its bottom surface expanding over the field below.

Perhaps some of those watching had realized it was, in fact, the muzzle of a gun.

"Ninety-nine yards in length, comprised of ninety-nine linked manadite crystals connected by the LOBOS transition method, and taking ninety-nine seconds to deploy," Saya said, standing atop the center of the disk, as she observed Lenaty through an air-window. Given the tremendous size of the Lux, she couldn't see the stage at all. "In addition, it can only fire one shot. It's incredibly difficult to control, though, and if you mess it up, it won't even deploy."

Indeed. For the whole time throughout this match, Saya had been focusing part of her attention on activating this Lux.

"Huh? Huh? H-hold on, wait a minute…!"

Lenaty, finally returning to her senses, glanced around in

distress. She was no doubt looking for somewhere to run.

But there was no escape.

“Don’t bother. I designed this Lux to cover most of the stage.”

“Th-that’s…” Lenaty, about to break into tears, looked directly up.

“Now, take this, Lenaty. The ultimate weapon belonging to me —Saya Sasamiya.”

And with that, feeling no more than a numb pain in her finger, Saya pulled the trigger.

“Type forty-two super-large caliber particle cannon, Neunfairdelph—fire.”

The next moment, a pillar of light almost a hundred yards in diameter bore down on the stage.

“Aieeeeeeeeee!”

Lenaty raised her hands and boosted her power armor in a futile attempt to withstand the blast, but she was quickly swallowed by the burst of light.

In all, the discharge continued for a little less than ten seconds. When it finished, the dirt lining the floor of the stage had been completely burned away, revealing its steel base.

And in its center, sprawled motionless on her back, was Lenaty.

Saya deactivated the Neunfairdelph, restoring it to her backpack, and landed softly beside her.

“Ha… Heh… Heh-heh…! How was that…? Lena…withstood it…!” Sparks were flying from all over her body, but that didn’t stop Lenaty from letting out a confident laugh.

From the looks of it, she was no longer capable of moving.

“Yep, pretty impressive,” Saya replied, nodding along with her.

In fact, Lenaty had suffered remarkably little damage despite a direct and prolonged hit from the Neunfairdelph.

Her energy barrier, it seemed, had protected her from the full brunt of the attack.

However, the biggest weakness of the LTM was the difficulty inherent in maintaining control over the process. If you weren’t careful, the equipment would break down at best, and at worst, it would cause a runaway meltdown.

Judging by the noises emanating from Lenaty’s chest, Saya believed that was what had incapacitated her.

“Heh… Heh-heh…! Awesome…! Really awesome…! Lena… Lena has never had this much fun before…! Ah… This must be

what sis was talking about… A good match…!”

Finally, with a clear, audible crack, Lenaty’s school crest shattered.

“Ernesta Kühne—crest broken.”
“End of battle! Winner: Saya Sasamiya!”

As the computerized voice rang throughout the stadium, Lenaty looked up at Saya with gleaming eyes. “Hey… You’ll… You’ll play with Lena again, won’t you…? You have to… Saya Sasamiya…!”

At this, Saya broke into a gentle laugh. “Hmm, so you finally remembered?”

*

“Argh! I lost!”

In Allekant Académie’s special viewing lounge at the Procyon Dome, Ernesta spread her arms out and fell flat on the table in front of her.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Not even my dear little sister can withstand a weapon as ridiculous as that!” Behind her, Ardy, his arms folded, let out a hearty laugh.

“Nnngh, I guess so. That thing really was absolutely insane.”

No matter how fond you were of large armaments, no matter how obsessed you were with awesome firepower, no one in their right mind could have possibly envisioned a Lux large enough to obliterate the whole stage.

“And Camilla and Rimcy still haven’t come back to our prep room, either!”

“They probably don’t think it would be appropriate, given how they’ve been helping Saya Sasamiya,” Ardy pointed out.

“Dear me, don’t tell me you’ve developed a level of human sensibility?” Ernesta exclaimed, taken by surprise at his apparent growth.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Not exactly!”

“…And humility, too? I suppose that means you’re complete,” Ernesta replied with a forced smile. At least she could take some satisfaction from that.

Of course, she was disappointed Lenaty had lost, but no doubt her newest autonomous puppet had learned a lot from the match.

She couldn't wait to see what kind of being Lenaty, starting from a blank slate, would grow into.

"Ah… You two are the future I've always wanted," she murmured in a soft voice, letting her emotions flood out.

She said that not for Ardy but to reaffirm it to herself.

One day, perhaps in the not-too-distant future, the world would be filled with truly autonomous puppets, occupying a space somewhere between human beings and Genestella. She truly believed that.

And so—

"Hmm… And this is the dark side of that…"

The air-window in front of her displayed a map of Asterisk filled with countless small flashing dots.

Those were the locations of each of her Valiant units.

She may have built the puppets for the Golden Bough Alliance, but that hadn't stopped her from installing a few features of her own.

"So they've moved all one thousand of them over here? That can't have been an easy feat…"

Even putting aside the amount of physical effort that would have to be involved, there was no way they could have transferred that much inventory through normal procedures. The Golden Bough Alliance, it seemed, had considerable influence not only with the port authority but also all throughout Asterisk.

"I hope this doesn't get messy… But I guess it's none of my business."

As far as Ernesta was concerned, once the product was delivered, the customer could use it however they saw fit.

After all, as a scientist, she absolutely detested blind technological reliance.

When people judged the necessity of any new technology, it was only fair that they understood the negative consequences it could also bring.

"I suppose I had better make some preparations of my own, too…"

CHAPTER 5
THE INHERITOR OF THE RUNESWORD

“Saya really went overboard this time…,” Ayato murmured as he watched the end of her match.

His companions, it seemed, had been left completely speechless. To be fair, even he, who had known her the longest, was nothing short of astounded. Claudia was lost for words as well.

And the other two—Elliot and Noelle—seemed to be in mute shock.

“…That truly was excessive,” Elliot eventually whispered under his breath.

Ayato had to agree with that assessment.

Nonetheless, at the same time, that incredibly overpowered Lux was so in character for Saya.

“Ah… Well, congratulations are in order, Claudia. Three of the best four this time around hail from Seidoukan. I suppose it’s fair to say that this has been your season. I’m quite jealous,” Elliot said with a slight shake of his head, turning toward Claudia with a bitter smile.

From his attitude, he wasn’t saying that with empty words—he truly was congratulating them. As student council president of a rival school, that mustn’t have been easy for him, Ayato thought.

“Not at all, it’s the contestants themselves who deserve your praise,” Claudia began with a seemingly practiced response. “I just wonder…,” she continued, her voice trailing off as she glanced back toward Saya, who was dragging her leg as she left the stage. “With

those injuries, will she be fit to fight in the next round?"

Indeed, Saya might have won, but she had sustained significant injuries, particularly on her arms.

And not only that, her next opponent would be Orphelia. Even if she were in perfect condition, it would still be an arduous struggle at best.

"I should go check on her," Ayato said, rising to his feet.

"Ah, please wait a moment, Amagiri," Elliot called after him. "It's you we came here to talk about."

"Me…?"

Given that Elliot had obviously come to discuss something confidential, Ayato had assumed he wanted to speak with Claudia.

"Or strictly speaking, your sister."

"—!"

At this, Ayato immediately retook his seat.

Claudia's expression tightened ever so slightly, too.

"I don't know the details, nor do I want to. But I believe that only I, using the Runesword, can help her—or at least, there is a possibility that I can. That's what I came here to say."

"The Lei-Glems… Right!"

Ayato exchanged glances with Claudia.

The Lei-Glems was a unique Orga Lux with the ability to cut through only that which its user intended to destroy, passing harmlessly through all else. With that power, there was indeed a possibility that it could destroy the fragment of the Raksha-Nada embedded in Haruka's body.

"In other words… You would help Ayato's sister?"

"So far as I am able."

"That's a generous offer…" Claudia paused there, staring at Elliot as if trying to gauge his intentions. "But how does that benefit you?"

Elliot was the student council president of Saint Gallardworth Academy. Naturally, his own school would be his highest priority. Helping Haruka might not be directly against his interests, but it wouldn't exactly help them in any way, either. It might have been different if, like his fellow student council president Sylvia, his own personal goals aligned with theirs, but if that wasn't the case, he had no real reason to help them.

"Is it not natural that a knight wielding the Runesword should help a lady in distress…? But no, I suspect that won't convince

you." Elliot shrugged, shining them an amused smile. "To tell you the truth, the material benefits will come entirely from our benefactor. So you needn't worry about that."

"…And can you tell us who this benefactor is?"

"If I could, I would have done so from the beginning."

This time it was Claudia's turn to shrug her shoulders. She had no doubt known that would be his response.

Only a very small number of people knew about Haruka's situation. Apart from the Golden Bough Alliance, there was Ayato, Claudia, Saya, Kirin, Sylvia, Commander Lindwall, and Haruka herself in Stjarnagarm, as well as Claudia's mother and Galaxy's highest executive, Isabella. The only other person with any knowledge would have to be the director of the hospital, Jan Korbel. There was no need for Elliot to keep any of those names secret.

In that case, that only left—

"Very well, let's put that aside for now. But I do have one question. Elliot, you said that you don't know the details, but you do understand the situation of the person you want to save, no?"

"There's a fragment of the Raksha-Nada inside her body," Elliot answered cautiously. "Although I don't know how exactly that happened."

He had said as much himself just a moment ago, but it seemed he didn't want to delve too deeply into it.

"You understand what that means, then?" Claudia asked. "So long as the Raksha-Nada remains inactivated, that shard simply doesn't exist. Can the Lei-Glems destroy a target that isn't there?"

"That's…" Elliot hesitated. "Indeed, I can't guarantee anything. I haven't mastered the Runesword as well as Ernest did. Nonetheless… Our benefactor was under the impression that, in theory, it wouldn't be impossible."

"In theory?"

"The Lei-Glems only makes physical contact with its user's intended target. And the act of targeting something redefines it in a sense. That should apply just as equally to that shard from the Raksha-Nada. It's not that it doesn't exist, but that it occupies an ambiguous status somewhere between existence and nonexistence. And so by targeting it with the Lei-Glems, I might be able to do something about it… Or so I'm told, in any event."

"Targeting it with the Lei-Glems. I see… It's an interesting

idea."

Judging from her reaction, Claudia seemed to think the proposal had merit, but Ayato had no idea how it was all supposed to work.

Perhaps having noticed his confusion, Claudia turned toward him. "Hmm, let's say that we used the Lei-Glems to cut a steak," she began.

"…I would never use the Runesword in that way," Elliot interrupted in disgust at the analogy.

Claudia, however, went on. "We could use the Lei-Glems to cut away only those parts of it that were overcooked or burned. But how do we judge what is overcooked? That's where its user's sense of recognition comes in. What the Lei-Glems does is determines what is overcooked based on its user's definition. That's the process that Elliot here described as *redefinition*. And as a result of that process, it can cut through only what its user intends to target."

"So… What you're saying is that if Elliot can picture the fragment, then the Lei-Glems could target it even if it doesn't physically exist?"

"Theoretically, it makes sense. Of course, normally it would be impossible to recognize something like that, but if the Lei-Glems' user knows that it *should* be there, then it might just work…"

In other words, there was a chance, however small.

If so, it was worth trying. After all, neither Ayato nor the others had found any other way of removing it.

He exchanged glances with Claudia to measure her thoughts before turning to Elliot and bowing his head in thanks. "I don't know exactly how you found out about this… But thank you. Please try."

"…I'll do what I can."

Right after Ayato contacted her, Haruka made her way to the special viewing lounge.

As Elliot had been reluctant to explain anything in detail over the phone, they once again went over the proposal. After all, no one knew better than him just how effective Sinodomius was at gathering information. He couldn't afford to be careless.

"…I see. If that's true, then there *is* a chance it might work. But I think it will still be difficult." Haruka didn't need long to agree with the idea. "I'm in your hands, Elliot," she said, meeting his

gaze.

"N-not at all," stammered Elliot from his position next to Ayato.

To tell the truth, he hadn't expected her to give her consent so quickly. Her swift agreement had left him feeling unexpectedly nervous.

So this is Amagiri's sister…

According to Sinodomius's reports, she had been asleep in the hospital for an extended period of time. Apparently, she used to be affiliated with Seidoukan, but there were no official records of her ever having participated in any matches. And while Sinodomius hadn't been able to confirm the veracity of the reports, it was thought that she had participated in the Eclipse with the Ser Veresta. That wasn't hard to believe, judging by the trouble she had found herself in. She was clearly over her head, caught up in something big.

Nonetheless, Elliot was more interested in her reputation as a swordswoman. After all, she was Ayato Amagiri's elder sister and an assistant instructor of the Amagiri Shinmei style. On top of that, she had been enlisted into Stjarnagarm, which was known to be incredibly selective of its members, so Helga Lindwall herself had clearly attested to her skills.

Above all, if he were to help her in this way, he would no doubt have an opportunity to see her abilities for himself one day. Her attitude was casual, her movements carefree, but it was crystal clear to him that she was ready to respond to anything. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that he couldn't sense any weakness or vulnerabilities in her.

I wouldn't stand a chance against her as I am now…

With the Lei-Glems, he would have the ultimate advantage if he were to face her in a contest, and he prided himself on his swordsmanship, of course. But he knew that when it came down to it, his skills simply wouldn't measure up to hers.

"In that case… Let's give it a try," Elliot said, unfastening the holder at his waist and activating the Lei-Glems.

The Orga Lux's opaque pure white blade was slightly shorter than when Ernest had wielded it, adjusted to the optimal size for its present user.

"Where exactly is it embedded?"

"Hmm… I can't pinpoint it exactly but around here," Haruka answered, lightly touching the right-hand side of her body.

It was a rather large area that she indicated, but no doubt it was difficult for her to accurately identify its precise location.

"It's about as large as someone's little finger, yes?"

"Mm-hmm," Ayato answered. "Any smaller and it wouldn't be able to be controlled. So if you can break it up—"

"—it will disappear," Elliot finished for him.

It was easy enough to say, but actually pulling it off was another thing entirely. It was a tiny fragment, no larger than his little finger, embedded in an unclear location, which wasn't physically present. Destroying it was no simple matter.

Nonetheless, if he was to get Julis to provide him with information on Percival, he had no choice but to find a way to pull it off. That was the only way to resolve Percival's situation as quietly as possible, which in turn would benefit both her and Saint Gallardworth Academy.

He took a deep breath, concentrating his awareness on the Lei-Glems, when it let out a silent flash. The pure white blade passed straight through Haruka's torso.

"…"

There was no response.

The blade hadn't made contact with the fragment. He didn't know exactly why, but it was possible it had failed to target the fragment due to its user not properly recognizing the shard. All he knew was that it hadn't worked.

He tried a second, then a third time.

"Guh…!"

No matter how many times he moved the Lei-Glems, the result was always the same.

"It looks like this might be difficult," Claudia finally said, her expression troubled.

"Elliot…" Noelle, clearly worried, grabbed on to the edges of his sleeve.

Elliot gritted his teeth, turning his gaze downward. The Lei-Glems felt somehow heavier than usual.

"Don't worry about it, Elliot. I'm very familiar with just how difficult Orga Luxes can be to handle," Haruka said with a reassuring smile. Judging by her expression, it looked as if she was the one worried for him now.

"H-hold on! Let me try again…!" As Gallardworth's student council president, he couldn't afford to give up so easily.

Given that she had been ordered to attack Julis, Percival was undoubtedly caught up with a very dangerous organization. If something were to happen and her identity was revealed, it would have disastrous consequences for Gallardworth's public image, and Elliot himself would be held accountable as its student council president.

But to be honest, none of that really mattered to him. If worst came to worst, he would feel bad for those who had supported him during his tenure, but as far as he himself was concerned, there would really be no helping it.

The real problem would be if Elliott-Pound and their tool Sinodomius were to attempt to cover it all up and eliminate Percival. They were perhaps even working toward that end already.

In that case, his best course of action would be to save Percival before Sinodomius could get to her.

"Hmm…" Elliot closed his eyes, refocusing his attention.

"Ha…!" He brandished the Lei-Glems with all his strength.

"…"

Everyone in the room was watching him—but Haruka merely shook her head regretfully.

"Why isn't it working…?"

Was he doing something wrong?

Had he simply not found the shard, or was his compatibility with the Lei-Glems too low to fully draw on its power?

I guess it's true, then. I really am useless…

If Ernest were here, perhaps *he* would be able to—

It was a baseless assumption, but he had to fight himself to quell his thoughts.

And then—

"Your sword…," murmured Ayato all of a sudden, before holding his tongue.

"Huh?" Elliot turned toward him.

Ayato, however, merely averted his gaze. "No, it's just…"

"What about my sword?"

Ayato, it seemed, was reluctant to voice his thoughts, but with Elliot staring back at him so forcefully, he eventually relented. "It's just, and I know I'm probably speaking out of turn here, but… You're a lot more tense than you were last time we fought."

"What? That's absurd…!" Elliot quickly denied the accusation, but soon found himself shaking his head weakly to correct himself.

The two of them had last faced off in the semifinals of the Phoenix more than two years ago. His swordsmanship had improved immeasurably since then, becoming much more polished and sophisticated. There was no denying that.

And yet—

"…You may be right."

The sword was a mirror of one's heart. And in that case, given his present situation, his use of it was no doubt vague and ill-defined.

Having inherited the Lei-Glems and the role of student council president from Ernest when he became the academy's number one, Elliot had always felt himself being crushed by the pressure and expectations placed upon him. And in order to continue to use the Lei-Glems, he had to ensure that his soul remained pure and dedicated to justice. Nonetheless, the responsibilities of the student council often didn't allow for that. It was a very difficult set of weights to balance. He didn't have Ernest's dexterity.

"Even so, if I'm going to be like Ernest—!"

"That's impossible," Ayato interrupted firmly. "No one else could be him. Not me, not you."

Elliot knew that.

He knew that, but he had to come closer to that ideal.

"And Ernest couldn't be you, either."

"…What?" Elliot stared across at Ayato, lost for words at this unexpected declaration.

He had never considered that. But it was obvious. Ernest, who came out victorious no matter what he set his mind to, wouldn't even *want* to be like him.

Ayato, however, seeing Elliot's confusion, continued: "Your control over the sword is flawless, natural, and uninhibited. It's completely different from Ernest's—in style and in spirit. You can't compare them." Ayato paused there, scratching his cheek apologetically. "And, well… This might not be a good time, but I'd like to take back what I said during the Phoenix."

"Take back what?"

"During our match, I said that your sword was too light."

"Ah…"

Of course Elliot remembered. That match, those words—they had been nothing short of total humiliation. He had spent more than a year afterward working to remedy that shame in the lead-up

to the Gryps.

Nonetheless, in the end, Elliot's Team Tristan had been eliminated from the tournament before they could even face off against Ayato's Team Enfield.

"But in last year's Gryps, you had clearly sharpened your swordsmanship. It was faster and even lighter. There's no mistaking that some people grow stronger by shouldering more burdens, but there are plenty of people who increase their mastery through other means… So I'd like to take back what I said." And with this, Ayato bowed his head deeply.

"…I see." Elliot found himself being moved by an indefinable mixture of emotions.

But what Ayato had said was true: Elliot's swordsmanship *was* lighter than that of other people, faster and more supple. He should have been focusing on improving that quality of his. But in his depression, he had never been able to do so.

"Ha… You're right."

He found himself laughing at his own stupidity for having fallen into this trap without even realizing it.

He could never be as good as Ernest, not at the things that Ernest excelled at. He knew that, at some deep level, but he had kept trying to be what he couldn't.

He had to be who *he* was, to do the things that only *he* could do.

And just by acknowledging that, he felt as if a great burden had finally been lifted from his shoulders.

Then, in the back of his mind, he remembered what Julis had said to him the other day:

"I want you to go to the rescue of a princess in need. That's what knights do, isn't it?"

Exactly.

Before he was student council president, Elliot was a knight of Saint Gallardworth Academy.

Not even his position on the student council changed that.

And so if he couldn't save this woman in distress right in front of his eyes, what was he?

At that moment, the Lei-Glems suddenly became lighter in his hands.

"This is…"

And that wasn't all.

From the way the Orga Lux was trembling, he knew it was responding to something. Elliot turned his awareness to that sensation. There were two *things*—one of them large and powerful, the other so small that it seemed as if it might disappear at any moment.

The strong one was coming from the holder at Ayato's waist… meaning it must have been the Ser Veresta. Elliot had last seen a similar reaction when watching the two Runeswords come into close contact during the Gryps.

In that case, the other sensation would have to be—

The moment he realized it, the Lei-Glems identified and redefined it.

The Raksha-Nada…!

He grasped onto that sensation with his mind and unleashed the Orga Lux's power.

"!"

"Too fast…!"

Ayato and the others caught their breath, the room filled with suspense.

He couldn't see it. Nonetheless, as the pure white blade entered Haruka's abdomen, he felt it clearly divide the fragment of the Raksha-Nada clean in two.

"…Phew."

Elliot let out a deep sigh, returning the Lei-Glems to its holder. "That should do it."

When Ayato glanced toward Haruka, she broke into a wide grin, nodding back to him. "Yep, I felt it—only for a brief instant, and then I guess it just shattered…"

"I see… Thank goodness." Ayato, holding his hand to his chest, let out a sigh of relief.

Elliot turned to leave. He had done what he came to do, so there was no need to stay. After all, if he were to disappear for too long without informing anyone at Gallardworth, it would only be a matter of time before Sinodomius took notice.

“Then this is where we part ways. Let’s go, Noelle.”

“R-right…!” Noelle answered joyfully as he began going toward the exit.

“Thank you, Elliot.” Haruka said, and she and Ayato bowed their heads.

“…That should be my line,” Elliot murmured under his breath with a forced smile.

“Elliot?” Noelle, no doubt having heard him, looked up at him in confusion.

“No, it’s nothing. We need to head back. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

There was a lightness to his step as he left the special viewing lounge—as if he had been reborn.

*

Through the night sky, an airship gently sailed.

In the cabin, the three members of the Golden Bough Alliance sat, their enigmatic faces each hiding a contemptuous smirk for the world outside.

“Everything’s good on my end. We’ve finished deploying the Valiants, and all the underground preparations are complete. The problem is how to handle *that*… What are you doing about it, Varda? I hear you tried to set the Holy Spear loose.” Dirk Eberwein, sitting arrogantly on the sofa with his legs crossed, let out a derisive snort.

Varda, standing by the door, shrugged her shoulders. “Percival Gardner’s driving motive is guilt. Fanning that guilt of hers allows us to raise her efficiency with the Amalthean Goat so that she will be able to handle the Holy Spear. But at the same time, it does cause her mental stability to deteriorate and increases the risk of her running amok.”

“What’s the point of that? If we don’t get it, we won’t be able to control the Valiants. At the very least, you ought to be able to make a sensible decision.”

“…Very well. But we don’t have much time, so I can offer no guarantees,” Varda answered softly.

This time it was Madiath’s turn to speak up: “As far as I’m

concerned, we should focus on the matter at hand. It will all be for nothing if the preparations aren't perfect."

"Of course. They're proceeding without error. Do you think I've been running from one country to another for the fun of it? Just give me a little time, and it will all fall into place by itself."

"Ha! By itself? Yeah, right," Dirk snorted with scorn.

Those who had been brainwashed by Varda had no awareness of what she had done to them. As far as they were concerned, they were acting according to their own free will, even if they technically weren't.

"That's the kind of thinking that made the Jade Twilight a total failure," Dirk growled.

"I had only just awakened back then, and my sense of awareness was limited. This time is different." Unusually for Varda, she broke into a clearly displeased frown.

It looked like her past mistakes were a sensitive topic for the Orga Lux.

"Yeah? I wonder. You handled the previous plan pretty similarly as far as I can tell. And how did that pan out?"

"The plan was perfect. If not for Haruka Amagiri, we would already have reshaped this world into its ideal form." Varda paused there, coolly shifting her gaze toward Madiath.

"Come now, this is our last meeting… Let's not squabble. Although perhaps internal conflict is in our nature?" Madiath broke into an amused smile as he rubbed his chin. "In any event, if the preparations are complete, then I must remind you not to put yourself in harm's way. We won't be able to carry out the plan if either you or Miss Orphelia is absent."

"If you've both done your part, there shouldn't be any need for that. Unless…"

"You're the one who keeps causing problems!" Dirk glared across the table at her.

He and Varda exchanged murderous sneers, but Madiath's false smile never wavered. "Yes, well, he does have a point."

"It isn't anything that can't be addressed with a few minor adjustments to the plan."

"Hurry up and spit it out, then!"

No matter how much he rebuked him, Dirk knew that Madiath Mesa simply didn't care. His hatred for the man truly knew no bounds. And the longer he was forced to spend with him, the more

they ended up speaking together, the deeper that hatred ran.

"There are two problems. As for the first… Stjarnagarm is apparently moving to arrest me."

"Yeah?" Dirk retorted. "In the middle of the Festa? They've got some gall."

Stjarnagarm's commander, Helga Lindwall, had apparently joined forces with Galaxy. Nonetheless, if they were to try to apprehend the Festa Executive Committee's chairman while the tournament was still taking place, there was bound to be severe blowback from the other foundations.

"Of course, they don't want to spoil the tournament. I'm sure they plan to keep it all under wraps."

"And they're arresting you based on what exactly?"

"That's the surprising part. It seems to be in relation to fraudulent accounting. Although they may dress it up as aggravated breach of trust or maybe graft."

"Huh?" Dirk found himself doubting his ears. "What the hell is that about?"

"I used to be an outside director at an organization called PVA Industries. And indeed, I do recall instructing them to tweak their balance sheets to obtain a role in Japan's rocket development project. Back then, PVA Industries was hardly enjoying such business success as to be entrusted with a national project. But we lacked manpower and needed to gain a foothold. And so… Well, this isn't exactly uncommon in the corporate realm."

It was often said that the world, presently dominated by the IEFs, was considerably less ethical than in past centuries, especially when it came to financial crimes—so much so that incidents involving the IEFs seldom turned into full-blown scandals.

"So it was more than ten years ago? The statute of limitations must have expired by now."

"I thought so, too… But then there's the extraterritorial complications."

"…Ah, so they'll act as if you were abroad, then?"

Galaxy was headquartered in Japan and Madiath was officially an executive there, but that was really only an on-paper title. While he often traveled abroad to carry out his duties, the Executive Committee was formally based in Asterisk. In other words, the statute of limitations didn't count the time when he had been outside of Japan.

“They’re certainly attacking from an unexpected angle. I’m afraid they found my blind spot.”

“Hmph, only because Galaxy’s helping them.”

In principle, Stjarnagarm had no authority to investigate crimes that took place outside Asterisk, but exceptions could be made if they received an external request for assistance. With Galaxy’s connections, it wouldn’t have been hard to push the Japanese authorities to get Stjarnagarm involved.

“So what are you going to do about it?” Varda, until now seemingly uninterested in their conversation, finally spoke up.

“We can’t afford to let them take me. I’ll have to go underground a little ahead of schedule. I *was* already planning to disappear from the public arena, but I’ll just have to move that forward a day.”

“Won’t that cause problems with the tournament?”

“The vice-chairman is a distinguished fellow. I’m sure he’ll have no problem handling things.”

The vice-chair of the Festa Executive Committee belonged to the faction opposing Madiath. Madiath’s sudden disappearance would no doubt cause some consternation, but he was sure they would waste no time reshaping the tournament as they saw fit, undoing all his changes to it. The city guard would no doubt try to get as much information from them as they could, but the vice-chairman and the others didn’t know anything that could lead them to him.

“And where are you going to hide?”

“Let’s see… I do need to apply the finishing touches to the underground project. It seems I have a fateful connection to that place. I’ll watch the excitement of the Lindvolus from the shadows.”

“…And are you going to join the final act yourself?” Dirk scoffed. That would be highly out of character for Madiath, he thought, but he chose not to add that to his remarks.

“That said, this *will* make it more difficult for me to oversee every aspect of the plan,” Madiath went on. “Varda, I trust you will be able to deal with any unforeseen developments?”

“…Tch, that’s asking for trouble,” Dirk sneered. “But I guess you’re not giving us much choice here.”

As if they could just leave everything to Varda. The Orga Lux might have been able to manipulate people’s thoughts, but it was completely incapable of *understanding* them.

“And the second problem?” Varda pressed.

“Ah, indeed,” Madiath said lightly. “It appears our friends have extracted the shard of the Raksha-Nada that we left within Haruka. I don’t know how they did it, but that’s quite a feat.”

“Huh? I guess that means Ayato Amagiri won’t bother with the semifinals, then?”

“That is a logical assumption.”

Madiath had manipulated Ayato into entering the tournament by leveraging Haruka’s life. If that danger had passed, there was no longer any need for him to continue. Having reached the semifinals, he was just a stone’s throw away from achieving a grand slam, but Dirk sincerely doubted that Ayato had the ambition to see it through.

“What makes you think the other match will go smoothly?” he pointed out. “Saya Sasamiya is skilled, too. If both semifinal matches are canceled, won’t that throw a wet towel over your precious little tournament?”

The average broadcasting ratings for the Festa this year had surpassed 70 percent. That was one of the highest numbers ever achieved. And it was only natural to expect the championship match to top that. The whole world would be watching in real time.

“There shouldn’t be a problem. Even if the excitement dies down a little, that won’t change too much. It’s just a symbol, a way of initiating the process.”

Judging by her tone of voice, Varda, it seemed, was as apathetic toward it as ever. No doubt she would have preferred to put the plan into action right away.

“That’s the point. Precisely *because* it’s a symbol, we need to have as many people as possible witness it. If we could, I would like to burn the image of Miss Orphelia into the eyes of every single person on the planet.”

Madiath, on the other hand, was resolute on the matter. He was obsessed with it. He simply needed that paradoxical combination of love and hate in order to function. As far as Dirk was concerned, it was pathetic.

But then again, if he was any different, he wouldn’t have been able to wield the Raksha-Nada for as long as he had. The price that Orga Lux demanded was *anger*—the Runesword fed on its user’s resentment and indignation. And that level of anger required considerable energy. If that anger wasn’t without end, time alone

would render the weapon's user spent and wasted.

The fact that Madiath had been able to maintain it for this long was nothing short of extraordinary.

"So what's your solution? You *are* up to something, no?"

Dirk, as much as he hated to admit it, had to side with Madiath on this issue. If at all possible, they needed to ensure maximum anticipation for the championship match, so that all of humanity could know Orphelia's power. He might not have believed in their goals as fervently as Madiath did, but there was no mistaking that this would change the world. So if he could leave his mark and transform this godforsaken sandbox of theirs, then he was all for it.

"I have a thought. I can't be one hundred percent confident… but Ayato Amagiri has a good heart. I'm sure he'll meet our expectations." Madiath's soft grin as he finished speaking was so disgustingly slippery that it left Dirk feeling like vomiting.

"Welcome back, Mr. President!"

When Dirk returned to his office at Le Wolfe after the meeting, he found his secretary, Korona Kashimaru, waiting for him. Never mind that it was almost midnight; it looked like she still hadn't completed the tasks he had left her.

"Geez! How slow can you be? Don't tell me you still haven't finished?"

"I'm s-sorry, really!" Korona bobbed up and down, bowing apologetically in response to his reprimand.

Dirk watched her out of the corners of his eyes as he sat himself down on the sofa and rested his chin in his hands. "So how's Orphelia?" he asked.

"Ah yes! Her hand injury is pretty bad, but they've managed to stop the bleeding for now. But…her poison was too strong, so the medical staff couldn't do a very thorough examination…"

"I thought as much."

Korona didn't know it, but Orphelia had stopped taking the medications that helped to keep her toxins under control. Even a drop of her blood would probably be enough to fill a whole room with poison now. Without the most thorough precautions, no one would be able to approach her closely.

"Er, um… I know it's none of my business, but shouldn't she go to the hospital…?"

"Don't worry about it. They wouldn't accept her anyway."

As excellent as Le Wolfe's medical staff were, those at the hospital were indisputably superior. In fact, if all that was required was the treatment of regular injuries, he would have sent her there immediately. Nonetheless, in her present state, Orphelia required a dedicated isolation facility, and the hospital wouldn't be able to prepare one on short notice. Nor would Orphelia herself want to go. She only had two matches left to endure.

"B-but…she said something a little strange today…"

"Huh?" Dirk turned his piercing gaze toward Korona, prompting his secretary to jump back in fright and bow her head once more.

"I'm s-s-s-s-sorry! It's none of my business!"

"It's fine. Go on. What did she say?" Dirk pressed her.

Korona looked up at him fearfully before continuing. "Er, um… After the match… She's normally sadder, you know…? But today, well, there was something different about her, I guess…"

"She's always moping around. That's nothing new."

"I—I know, but today… She was angry, maybe?"

"Angry? Orphelia?"

Dirk couldn't picture that woman, a living mass of grief and resignation, possessing such human emotions.

That said, her quarterfinal match today against Sylvia *had* been a little odd.

Sylvia was certainly a strong opponent, and she had clearly developed her strategy for the encounter. But still, Orphelia's response had been unusually poor. If she had been her usual self, she should have been better able to counter her foe, her teleportation ability notwithstanding.

Had she become unstable from her lack of medication, or else —?

In any event, he would have to keep an eye on her.

"I'm surprised you noticed. Are you interested in her or something?" he asked.

"Huh? N-no, I mean… Ah, well, I think she's incredible!"

"Oh…? So cowardly little Korona isn't afraid of our almighty Orphelia anymore?"

Even to her admirers at Le Wolfe, the name Erenshkigal was practically synonymous with pure horror. For better or for worse, any normal person would no doubt flee in panic at the first sight of her.

“Th-that’s not it! She’s terrifying, really!” Korona shook her head from side to side. “B-but… Well, putting that aside… I mean, she’s one of us, right? We all go to the same school.”

“Oh, really…?” Her explanation was so absurd that Dirk found himself snickering involuntarily.

Once more, he scrutinized the hapless figure of his utterly useless secretary. “You’re a strange woman.”

“S-strange…?”

Dirk let out a tired sigh. “Korona, I’ve got a job for you. Go to Solnage’s headquarters for me. From tomorrow…right, for about a week.”

“Y-yes, sir… Wait, *what?!* B-but that means I’ll miss the final!”

“Shut up! Just go back to your quarters and start packing!”

“Y-yes, sir!” Korona stood sharply to attention at the sight of his threatening glare before all but dashing out of the room.

“What a completely useless woman…,” Dirk muttered, but even he was surprised at himself for this small act of kindness.

After all, the world would change with that championship match.

And even if the thought wasn’t fully formed, something deep inside him wanted that idiotic and hapless woman to live through it.

*

Percival Gardner was one of many children who had been born and raised at the Institute.

She, like them, was the product of genetic-engineering experiments. Unlike the Hercules Project, the explicit goal of which was to create artificial Genestella a priori from otherwise regular people, the Institute had inadvertently produced her by modifying her DNA while she was just an embryo.

Those experiments had borne many designer babies, but what made Percival unique was the fact that she had been *born a Genestella*. Back then, the conditions necessary for a child to become a Genestella had yet to be fully understood, and the probabilities were so low that it was widely considered impossible. In other words, the genetic manipulation that produced her had been intended to simply produce a regular person with greater than average strength and physical abilities, but instead, they had

birthed a strengthened Genestella. And among those designer babies, only she had been born that way.

Perhaps because of that, Percival had exhibited outstanding skills and abilities since her early childhood. Her physical strength and stamina, her intelligence, and her proficiency in combat were all first class, and she performed well in even the most arduous of simulations. Her only failing, as far as the staff at the Institute were concerned, was that her personality was too kind and gentle.

While Percival was a team leader among the designer children, the others failed to measure up to the expectations of the Institute. In that place, experiments that didn't produce results were mercilessly disposed of. Of course, the children also had value as products, and so they weren't needlessly wasted. They were simply shipped out to places throughout the world for one reason or another.

Still, there were some exceptions. Children who failed to reach a certain level of quality were considered deficient goods, and for them, there was no escaping their fate. After all, if they were put up on the market, they would end up damaging the Institute's public image.

And so, with the sole exception of Percival, it was decided the designer children would all be disposed of.

She had confronted the staff, pleading with them to save the lives of the other children. As a designer child herself, she had no parents or family to call her own. All she had were the other children, born to the same circumstances as her.

To her surprise, the head staff heard her out and even agreed to humor her wish.

They simply changed from an aggressive disposal policy to a more passive one. The head staff used her wish as an opportunity to conduct performance tests with her and to train another team simultaneously.

"How about this, then? If you and your team can survive this combat test to the end, we'll call off the disposal."

Taking the head staff for their word, Percival and the others were sent to an abandoned city where each of the teams would face off against one another in a practical assessment.

In the end, however, everyone except her had been annihilated.

Nonetheless, Percival fought on ferociously by herself. She took command and fought at the vanguard alone, leading her

companions against their opponents in spite of their obvious performance discrepancy. But it wasn't enough.

Unfortunately for her and the others, their opponents were other Genestella led by Rodolfo Zoppo and Dirk Eberwein. Rodolfo relentlessly pursued the designer children, while Dirk ensnared them in viciously deceptive traps.

And then, when Percival alone was left standing, having lost everything she had ever held dear, she had been approached by Dirk.

"Do you know why your whole team is dead? It's because you're incompetent as a leader. It's not your job to do everything by yourself. You listening? It's your fault they're dead. If you had put me in charge of that lot…I'd say about half of 'em would have lived."

With those words, Dirk beat the results of the test into her. It might have only been a simulation, but it was enough to break her heart.

"But how about this? I'll take your skills. You're useless as a leader, but you're not bad as a weapon. Come to my team. I'll talk to those idiot staff. If I'm gonna beat Rodolfo, I'm gonna need you. Don't worry. I'll make proper use of you."

So Percival became part of Dirk's team, serving under him up until the Institute sold him off to Le Wolfe.

And then—

Percival opened her eyes, staring out into the dimly lit warehouse.

Around her, the autonomous puppets—the Valiants—were lined up, ready for deployment.

Her head was throbbing.

At the same time, a nauseating sense of guilt gripped her chest.

She was tormented with self-hatred and a sense of inferiority—enough that she wished she could just disappear.

But she couldn't do that.

She, the sole survivor among the designed, couldn't do that. She had to keep going until the very end, to atone for what she had done.

"…You're awake?"

She turned around at the sound of that voice to find the figure of the Varda-Vaos.

Percival couldn't read any emotion in those expressionless eyes

staring back at her.

If she, too, could be like that—but she stopped herself there. That kind of thinking was nothing more than a means of running away. And trying to escape from what she needed to atone for was absolutely inexcusable.

“Hmm… It looks like you need some adjustments,” Varda said, resting a hand on Percival’s forehead.

A jet-black light gushed forth from the necklace at her chest, and something beyond her vision flowed into her head.

“Ah… Ah…”

It was a strange sensation, having someone tampering around inside your mind.

“Oh…? So even you have a wish?” Varda said.

Percival remembered. It was her wish for the Festa, which she had been one step away from achieving.

Assuming her team had won the Gryps, would the foundations have granted it to her?

“…You want to destroy the Institute? I see,” Varda murmured indifferently.

No doubt that didn’t mean anything to her.

But Varda had more to say. Perhaps, as far as she was concerned, it may have been no more than a prediction. She may have had no intent to see it happen directly. But for Percival, those words were a great comfort.

“Don’t worry. Once we have accomplished our plan, this Institute will be the first to be crushed.”

CHAPTER 6
AKARI YACHIGUSA AND MADIATH MESA

"A-amazing! Madiath Mesa and Akari Yachigusa have breezed through the fifth round! With this, they're well on their way to the quarterfinals!"

Madiath returned to his designated starting position, hearing the fevered commentary and the cheers of the crowd. Akari, already waiting for him, greeted him with a warm smile.

"Good work, Madiath. I didn't even need to do anything."

As soon as the match started, Madiath had promptly taken care of both their opponents, so Akari hadn't even had a chance to take a turn.

In fact, out of each of their five matches up to this point, she had only really done anything in their third one, after both of their opponents in that match had gone straight for her.

Perhaps they had assumed she specialized in working in the rear guard, but she took them both down splendidly. As far as Madiath was concerned, he was grateful their challengers were now wary of her, too.

"Don't worry about it. Just think of it like you're keeping prepared for when you're needed."

As they had expected, there were hardly any strong opponents in the Phoenix this year. Nor did any of Asterisk's schools seem to have entered any dark horse contestants. The remaining tag teams were nothing next to fighters like Ryoue Arato from the Eclipse.

"And besides, you're still not feeling a hundred percent, right?

Don't try to hide it, I can tell."

"…Thank you," Akari said, looking down at her feet apologetically.

Just as when Madiath first met Akari, she sometimes found herself feeling dizzy and would have to sit down. Recently, such episodes seemed to be becoming more frequent.

When they went to the hospital to get it checked out, the director Jan Korbel had diagnosed her with prana adjustment disorder. It was an illness unique to Genestella, which, as the name suggested, caused the body to reject the prana inside it. The symptoms varied from person to person, and there was no cure. Apparently, for some people the symptoms disappeared over time, but for others they only got worse.

In other words, there wasn't anything they could do about it.

As such, the best thing for her was to not overexert herself. Madiath represented them at their winner's interview, and after putting in enough time with the reporters, he returned to his prep room, where he found the student council president waiting for him.

"Ah, wonderful job. Just as I had expected."

"Thanks, I guess," Madiath replied coolly.

The student council president seemed to be in a good mood, but Madiath didn't hold that against him. If contestants from Seidoukan were to win in the Festa, then his reputation would naturally rise, too. Moreover, it was the student council president who had first scouted Madiath, so that would inevitably be taken into account as well.

The student council president turned to Akari. "I heard that you haven't been in great shape, Miss Yachigusa… Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"I guess all is well, then." The student council president's smile never wavered, but the eyes behind his glasses twinkled with some hidden light. "By the way… The reason I've come here is because we need to talk."

"Talk…?"

"Yes, about the future." The student council president spoke with exaggerated importance as he adjusted his glasses. "Assuming you were to win the Phoenix, I was wondering what you two were planning to do next."

"We've only just finished the fifth round. It's a little early to be

thinking about that."

"There aren't any teams left capable of standing up against you two, wouldn't you say? Well, Gallardworth and Le Wolfe's Orga Lux users might put up a bit of a fight…but it's nothing that you and Miss Yachigusa can't handle."

Madiath had to agree with that assessment. If there was anyone in Asterisk capable of stopping them now, it would have to be someone at the same level as Jie Long's Ban'yuu Tenra.

"So you want to talk about the future…? I'm guessing you want me to enter the Gryps, then?" Madiath asked innocently.

"Of course. We need you to keep going as far as you can," the student council president answered with a meaningful glance.

So long as Madiath was bound by contract, he had no say in the matter.

Special scholarships like the one that had been awarded to him typically lasted until graduation from high school, but they could be extended until the end of one's university studies with the mutual agreement of both the school and the student. Up until he had ended up revealing his abilities, he had been intending to stay at Seidoukan through university, but with the way things had turned now, he wanted to graduate sooner rather than later. Nonetheless, he was still in his second year of high school, so at the very least, he would have to enter the Festa one more time—in other words, next year's Gryps.

However, even if he were to participate in the team tournament, whether or not he would actually put in an effort would depend on his mood at the time. Right now, it was precisely because Akari was his tag partner that he was putting in his all.

"What about you, Akari? What are your plans?"

"I…I don't know yet," she answered. "I'll talk to my mother when things calm down and give it some thought."

The student council president narrowed his eyes. "I see… I suspected as much… Hmm…"

"What…?"

"Oh no, it's nothing. Well then, I should be going." And with that, the student council president left the room with a light wave of his hand.

"Hmph… And I thought he was going to try to recruit you again," Madiath said as he watched him leave.

Akari broke into a weak smile, scratching at her cheek. "It's

because my abilities aren't suited to team battles."

It was true that Akari's abilities would affect not only her opponents but her fellow team members, too. That wouldn't affect their numbers, but it would leave them in a bad way if they were up against, say, a team of five of Jie Long's martial artists.

"…It's fine, I guess. Anyway, we've got tomorrow off. It's been a while, so why don't we go on a date?" Madiath asked casually.

Akari nodded, her smile softer and more genuine than it had been a moment earlier. "I'd love to."

The midsummer sky was deep and expansive.

The sun's rays were strong enough to pierce into one's skin, the heat relentlessly harsh, and the high humidity of the lake city almost too much to bear.

Nonetheless, Akari chose a small place by the edge of the residential area to go to.

"Akari, are you sure you're feeling okay?"

"I'm fine. Look, I've brought a parasol." Akari spun around with a broad smile, holding the item overhead, but she was still sweating considerably.

Thankfully, at least the cool breeze blowing over the surface of the lake was a minor respite.

"You're a bit strange, though, wanting to come here in this scorching heat."

"Isn't it nice? I like it here. And you know, people notice me now whenever I go out in town…"

Ever since their breakout success in the Phoenix, Madiath and Akari had both been featured extensively in the media, no doubt due to the fact that neither of them had been public figures up until that point. Now they were all but the highlight of the tournament.

Of course, there were contestants like that in the Festa every year. The current hubbub surrounding them wouldn't last forever. Next year the attention of the masses would no doubt fall on someone else. Unless, of course, Madiath or Akari were identified as possibilities for multiple consecutive wins or even a grand slam.

"Ah, it's so wonderful, staring up at the sky like this." Having lowered her parasol, Akari looked to be at peace.

Madiath found his attention wandering at the carefree sight of her looking toward the sky. As he gazed at her cherry-colored hair, her long eyelashes, her white skin beading with perspiration—she

was the same person she had always been, but now, he felt somehow as if time had drawn to a halt.

"Madiath? What's wrong?" Akari, realizing he had been watching her, tilted her head in curiosity.

"…Ah, I was just thinking how beautiful you are."

"Huh?!" Akari lowered her parasol in an attempt to hide her scarlet face. "Wh-what's this, all of a suddennn—?!"

It was a pure and innocent response, not at all what Madiath would have expected from someone who had worked in the Rotlicht.

Akari had changed considerably since he had first met her, and that was probably for the best. Nonetheless, some selfish part of him hoped that this cuteness of hers would never fade.

The future, huh…?

It wasn't because the student council president had raised the topic. The old Madiath would never have bothered to contemplate something as far-flung as what had yet to come. Not only had he grown up in an environment where there were no guarantees whatsoever about what might come next, but on a personal level, he simply didn't have any interest in it.

Now, though—

"Say, Akari," he began.

"Yes?" Akari peeked out at him from behind her parasol. Her cheeks were still tinged pink.

"After we graduate, what do you think about living together?"

"Wha—?" With this, her face turned an even deeper shade of red.

"Akari?"

"Um, I mean…" She fell silent for a long moment, her expression gradually turning serious. "I know I've told you this before… But I don't really know what it means to love anyone."

"Because you can't love yourself, right?"

"…Yes."

That was a feeling Madiath simply didn't understand.

You were you, and others were others. As far as he was concerned, those two principles were completely separate.

For instance, he neither liked nor disliked himself, but he *did* like Akari.

Nonetheless, she had her own reasons for thinking that way.

"But then… Maybe that part of me will change, too. Maybe I

can finally be myself now? Right, if we can win the Phoenix, then…" She let out a quiet laugh before shyly falling silent once again.

Speaking of which, Madiath knew that for Akari, there wasn't any particularly deep meaning behind their potential victory. What she wanted was for her mother to love her…or if not that, to at least acknowledge her existence. For her, the Phoenix was simply a means to that end.

"So, Madiath, can you wait a little while longer for my answer?"

"…All right. But I doubt you'll keep me waiting too long."

Akari pursed her lips sullenly. "I envy your confidence, Madiath."

As it happened, they enjoyed an easy victory just a few days later.

*

When Madiath awoke to the sunlight breaking in through his window, he realized there was a strange weight resting on his right arm.

When he turned his head, he came face-to-face with Akari lying asleep next to him.

"…"

He tensed for a brief moment before letting out his breath and gently pulling out his arm so as not to wake her.

Nonetheless—

"Ngh…" Akari slowly opened her eyes, their gazes meeting.

"Good morning, Akari," he reluctantly called out.

"!" Her mouth fell agape in vacant confusion. Then her eyes snapped shut, and she hurriedly dived under the bedsheet.

"…G-good morning…," came a weak, muffled voice as Madiath got out of bed.

They were in a suite at the Hotel Elnath. A victory celebration had been held for the two of them the previous night, in which they had brushed up against all of Galaxy's big names. Madiath was just grateful that they had rooms prepared for them. Of course, Akari's was supposed to be the one next to his.

"Do you want some coffee?" he asked as he changed into his

clothes.

"…Yes, please," came Akari's voice, only slightly louder than it had been a moment ago.

As was to be expected of Asterisk's most prestigious hotel, the room was equipped with a high-quality coffee maker, not the usual instant kind. As he activated the device, he heard Akari get out of bed behind him and head into the bathroom, but he purposefully didn't look around.

She came out after a short while, refreshed and fully dressed, looking somewhat nervous.

“Here,” he said, holding out her cup of coffee.

“Th-thank you,” she answered as she slowly brought it to her lips. “It’s delicious…”

Without saying anything, Madiath sat down on the edge of the bed. Akari soon joined him by his side.

Neither of them said anything, but it was strangely comfortable, relaxing.

Akari leaned her head against Madiath’s shoulder.

They didn’t need to do anything or talk about anything in particular. It was just nice to be together like this.

Now that Madiath thought about it, the previous night might very well have been the first time he had ever been able to sleep soundly with another person by his side.

Essentially, it was the first time he had ever known true comfort.

“By the way…,” he began after a while. “Akari, have you decided what you’re going to wish for?”

As the champions of the Festa, the foundations would grant them both one wish.

Of course, some things would be impossible. Not even the foundations could perform magic. They couldn’t bring the dead back to life, and it was difficult to change people’s hearts and minds (although money could go some way toward achieving that). When it was said that they could do anything, what was really meant was that they could do anything within the realm of reality, owing to their total domination of the world and its economy.

“…What about you, Madiath?” Akari asked, turning the question back to him.

That was unusual for her, but Madiath didn’t mind answering first. “I’m not sure yet.”

It wasn’t that he had no desires, but nothing concrete came to mind. If he had to choose, he might go with money, but of course there would be a limit to that. The amount would no doubt depend on whether he wanted it all at once or in installments, so that just raised more questions.

“But if you’re asking me, don’t tell me you’ve already…?”

“Heh…” Akari smiled mischievously. “Yep, I’ve decided,” she answered, her voice somewhat proud.

“No fair. All by yourself? When did this happen?”

“Just the other day.”

“Hmm… Well, what is it?”

“It’s…a secret.” Seeing Madiath’s confusion at this blunt answer, Akari’s shoulders shook in amusement. “Ha, I’m kidding. It’s a joke. Don’t look at me like that.”

He must have been making a strange face, as Akari continued to laugh softly to herself before continuing: “My wish—”

But before she could say anything more, her mobile chimed with an incoming call.

All because of that, Madiath had no idea what she had been about to say.

And he never would.

“Sorry to call you so early, Miss Yachigusa. Please, we need to talk. It’s a matter of some urgency.”

The voice coming out of the blank air-window was that of the student council president.

“Uh, yes… What is it?”

“Er, well, I don’t really know how to put this… Miss Yachigusa, it seems that your mother has just passed away.”

At that moment, Akari’s expression froze over. “Huh…?”

The cup in her hands slid silently to the floor, black coffee seeping into the carpet.

“Please return home at once. I’ve already seen to getting you permission to leave Asterisk.”

“Ah, um, wait a minute… My mother… What…?”

Akari seemed to be in shock and had yet to fully grasp the situation.

Madiath took her by the shoulders and stared darkly into the empty air-window. “Hey, prez. What happened? Explain what’s going on.”

“Huh? Madiath…? I’m really sorry. I don’t have all the information myself. All I’ve heard is that, well…it sounds like suicide…”

“Suicide…?” Akari’s eyes flooded with despair.

“Hey!”

“Er, I’m really sorry. A-anyway, it’s best you call home for the details.”

“…Fine. I’ll go with her.”

Madiath had heard all about Akari’s family situation and the events leading up to her coming to Asterisk. He wasn’t about to let

her go back alone.

"No, um… Unfortunately, that will be difficult. As you know, you need permission to leave Asterisk, and—"

"Can't you just—?"

But before he could finish, Akari placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, Madiath."

That trembling voice of hers didn't sound okay.

"But Akari…"

"Thank you for your concern… But this is my problem." Her expression was neither tearful nor happy, her vague smile betraying nothing at all.

In the end, Akari returned home alone.

After that, Madiath didn't hear so much as a word from her. Her mobile wouldn't connect, and he couldn't reach her. Days passed, one after the other.

Around a week later, he was called to the student council president's office.

Outside the window behind his desk, dark late-summer clouds blanketed the city.

"Your application to leave Asterisk has been approved… I know this process took some time, but you're still planning on going after her, I assume?"

"Of course," Madiath answered curtly.

The student council president wasn't exactly sparing with his time, and Madiath sincerely doubted that he would have called him all the way here just to tell him that. When Madiath remained stoic, the president eventually relented, letting out a deep sigh and crossing his arms.

"Well, I won't try to stop you… But I should tell you, you're wasting your time."

"…What's that supposed to mean?" Madiath glared back at him dangerously.

The student council president broke into a cold sweat, but continued, his voice flat: "As of yesterday, Galaxy accepted Miss Yachigusa's wish."

"—!"

"Festa champions can choose whether or not to make their wish public. Miss Yachigusa chose to reveal it only to you. So you have the right to know. Do you want to?"

Madiath nodded.

The student council president let out a weak cough before continuing, “Miss Yachigusa’s wish was this: to change her name, her face, and her family—to become someone else.”

“What…?!”

Madiath was left speechless. He had never even imagined that she would ask for such a thing.

“Something must have happened when she went back home,” the student council president continued. “I’ve never heard of such an unusual wish, though.”

“…Do you know why she wanted that?”

“Well…I suspect that it must have something to do with her mother.”

Madiath clicked his tongue in disgust at this obvious answer. Even he could see that.

The problem—no, before that.

“How am I supposed to find her?”

“I’m afraid that will be impossible.”

“…What?”

Madiath took a step forward, his rage bubbling over, as he slammed his hands down on the president’s desk.

“Th-there’s no use threatening me! Galaxy’s already accepted her wish, right? If she wanted to become someone else, then Akari Yachigusa no longer exists! You must understand! No one can change what the foundations have decided!”

“…Tch!”

As infuriating as it was, the president was right.

At the very least, there wasn’t anything that this man sitting in front of him could do.

Madiath spun around and stormed out of the office.

In any event, he would first go to her home. He doubted she was still there, but with more information, he might be able to guess her movements or find some other kind of clue as to her whereabouts.

Just as he was about to head toward Asterisk’s port, he stopped dead in his tracks.

He had barely stepped out of the main gate at Seidoukan Academy when his mobile began to ring with an incoming call.

The caller’s name wasn’t displayed, but he could guess who it was.

"…Akari?"

"…"

There was no answer.

Still, he was sure of it. It was her.

"…I'm sorry, Madiath."

Ah…

It was a small, shaky, abandoned voice.

The second he heard it, he knew: There was nothing that he could do.

A cool droplet fell down from the sky, striking against his cheek.

A light rain began to fall.

"I'm…I'm no good. No good. I…I couldn't love myself, not even for you. I'm such an idiot. I'm pathetic… I can't do it."

"…Oh."

Other than that, Madiath didn't know how to respond.

The rain grew stronger. It was an ambiguous rain, stronger than a drizzle, weaker than a downpour, not enough to dye the world gray.

But it wouldn't stop, not any time soon.

He didn't know how, but he knew.

"I'm sorry, Madiath… I'm really, truly sorry…"

Akari apologized to him again and again before eventually hanging up.

Madiath could feel his heart growing cold and, at the same time, anger stirring up from deep inside him.

Nonetheless, his thoughts were surprisingly clear.

First, he was going to find somewhere to vent that rage.

*

Late at night in the redevelopment area, a shadowed figure leaped from rooftop to rooftop amid the ruins.

The clouds were thick, and there was no moonlight. There were no working streetlamps in the redevelopment area, and the glow of the skyscrapers of the commercial area didn't reach this far away.

All at once, the figure came to a sudden stop and called out in a sneering voice: "Hey, I don't know who you are, but what's with that thirst for blood? You here to knock me off or something?"

Having been detected, Madiath slowly emerged from behind the

rubble.

He had wanted to be detected. He wouldn't be here if he wanted the figure to disappear without stopping.

"Oh? I thought you were with one of the other intelligence organizations, but that's a Seidoukan uniform… Ah, Madiath Mesa, huh?" The figure spoke deliberately and lowered its hood with a feigned laugh.

Of course, no intelligence agent at any of Asterisk's six schools would have failed to recognize the face of the champion of the Phoenix. As was often the case with those who spent their lives working in the shadows, this person's personality seemed to be somewhat warped.

"…Lantana, right? With Shadowstar?"

"I wonder?" The man shrugged his shoulders, playing dumb.

But Madiath had hardly expected him to give an honest answer.

"We've met before, but it felt like I was looking in a mirror."

"I'm afraid I've long since forgotten what my real face looks like," replied the hooded man—Lantana—lightly. His eyes let out a piercing glint.

Lantana still hadn't confirmed his identity nor had he denied it. He must have realized that Madiath had done his research.

In fact, Madiath had been monitoring Lantana's—and Shadowstar's—actions, using the connections he had made at the Eclipse. That was a dark part of the city he had hoped he would never again get caught up in, but it was undeniably useful knowing so many people who were familiar with the underground. And so he had relinquished almost all his hard-earned winnings and returned once more to that cruel and bloodthirsty sideshow.

"So what do you want with me? If you want Shadowstar to do something for you, you'd best take it to the student council prez first."

"There's no need to bother the president. I just want to ask you something."

"Hey, hey, I don't know what you're thinking, but do you really expect an intelligence operative to talk?"

"…I suppose not," Madiath replied, pulling a sword-type Lux from the holder at his waist and activating it.

"Heh! So it's brute force now! You've got some nerve!" Lantana immediately leaped backward, putting some distance between the two of them. "I don't care if you won the Phoenix, you're being a

bit cocky, don't you think? It's one thing fighting in a tournament, but it's something else entirely messing with people in my line of work."

"Yes, I know."

"Wha—?!"

In a single moment, Madiath had already circled around behind him. The blade of his Lux glimmered in the darkness, cutting through the tendons of Lantana's hands and feet.

"Guh…!"

"Now then, my question," Madiath said, staring down coldly at the fallen operative.

"And if I refuse to answer?"

"Then I'll kill you."

"Heh, that's a good one," Lantana scoffed.

"You don't think I'm serious?"

"Oh, I believe you. But what's to stop you from killing me even if I do talk?"

Madiath checked the time. "You're on a mission for Shadowstar, no? If you don't get back in time, your buddies will come looking for you, right? I'm guessing you can track one another's locations, so…we've probably got around five minutes, huh? After that, they'll probably come to pick you up. So how about it? Do you want to buy some time?"

"…You attacked me knowing that?" Lantana's angry voice carried a hint of legitimate surprise.

He paused for a moment—two, maybe three seconds—before giving up.

"Fine, I'll bite. What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about Akari Yachigusa and her mother."

"Heh, I thought so." Lantana stared up at him with a sickly smile. "I guess if you've come for me, you've already worked most of it out, huh?"

"…I've had my suspicions ever since the student council president was so confident that he could convince the Yachigusas to let Akari enter the tournament. She's told me what they're like. Sure, her relatives may have just used her as a convenient outlet to vent their own misfortunes, and for the right price, maybe *their* minds could be changed. But her mother…"

"Yeah, her mother. She was more difficult. That woman really hated her daughter, huh. On a real psychological level. Her regret

and disgust at giving birth to her were more than she could live with. Nothing would convince her, no matter what we offered. The honorable prez knew that."

"So when Akari spoke with her, that was—"

"—Yep, me. I'm a copyist, you know that." Lantana readily admitted to the accusation. "My abilities aren't some third-rate simulations. It can be a real pain, but if I put my mind to it, I can copy more than just someone's looks. Their memories, their emotions, even. I don't like going that far, though. It wears on you."

Madiath understood. It was no surprise that Akari had been fooled.

Especially given that she hadn't even seen her mother for so many years.

"That's why I understand her so well, you see. That woman just couldn't forgive her for existing. And with how well she did in the Festa, how famous that made her… That would have been unbearable for that woman. And then you both had to go and win. Everyone on Earth knows who she is now, and the media keeps going on and on about you and her. I'm betting it was enough to make her want to hang herself."

"…!"

"Hey! Just so you know, I was only doing my job, okay?" Lantana added, sensing Madiath's rising fury. "The prez wanted to keep the charade going a bit longer, I'm guessing. He wanted me to fill in for the mother every now and then, you know? But I guess her abilities were too much to handle, and with her prana adjustment disorder getting worse… He must've decided she wasn't worth it. He's obsessed with cost-effectiveness, you know? He must've thought you were good enough by yourself."

Lantana was becoming talkative. Maybe he was starting to worry about why his fellow operatives had yet to arrive.

"I see. I get the picture."

"H-hold on, wait! Don't you have any other questions? It's on the house; I'll let you know whatever you want…!"

"I've heard enough. Now it's my turn to tell you something." Madiath bowed down and whispered softly in his ear: "You could wait here forever—your buddies aren't coming. They *can't* come."

"Huh…?"

Perhaps unable to immediately grasp the meaning of those words, Lantana's face froze in shock.

“See ya.”

“No, don’t…! The prez, Galaxy, they won’t just—”

But before he could finish his desperate plea for mercy, Madiath plunged the blade of his Lux deep into his heart.

“It isn’t all that unusual for an operative to fail in their mission and vanish without a word, is it now?”

But there was no response.

Lantana was already dead.

“Besides… I don’t care if they find out,” Madiath murmured to himself. “It can all go to hell.”

When he looked up, there wasn’t even a single star in the night sky.

He may have taken some revenge, but the burning anger in the pit of his stomach had yet to abate. Maybe after he killed the student council president and then the old fool at the head of the Yachigusa family, he might feel a little better.

But he suspected he wouldn’t.

This anger wouldn’t be relieved until he could destroy his true enemy who had killed Akari Yachigusa. That was neither the Yachigusa family that had so pursued her nor the student council president or Galaxy, who had both used her to their own ends. Nor was it the ordinary people with their prejudices against Genestella nor the Genestella who were forced to bow down to everyone else. Nor was it he himself, who had given her a semblance of futile hope that she might escape this caged world in which they lived—no matter how enjoyable their time together had been.

No, his true enemy was—

“Indeed. A most logical conclusion.”

“…!”

Madiath spun around at the unexpected voice.

Standing across from him was a middle-aged man dressed in a suit and another young man with silver-colored hair that glistened in the night.

Madiath could hardly believe they had gotten so close without him noticing.

“You… Did you just…read my mind?”

“Oh, he’s quick on the uptake as well. What do you think, Ecknardt? Can we use him?” The man in the suit, devoid of expression, turned to his young companion.

“Yes, yes. I think we can, Varda. We’ve found ourselves a real

prize. I had been thinking we would need a human ally, but who would have expected that we might find one so soon?" The young man glanced back at his partner with a carefree grin.

Intuitively, Madiath readied himself for trouble.

Neither of them was human. He could sense they were similar in some ways to Jie Long's Ban'yuu Tenra, but she was closer to true personhood than these two.

No, the individuals in front of him were different on a fundamental level.

"Indeed. We aren't human," replied the one called Varda, his voice free of emotion.

Beneath that suit, some uncanny black light seeped into the darkness.

"…I don't know who you are, but how about you stop spying on my thoughts? I won't ask twice," Madiath called out in a low voice, aiming the point of his Lux toward the one called Varda.

"How rude of us. You're right, of course."

"Indeed."

To Madiath's surprise, the two of them nodded without any protest.

"We aren't your enemies. Think of us as potential allies… comrades, looking to create the same future you desire."

"Comrades…?" Madiath raised an eyebrow in suspicion.

Ecknardt, however, flashed him a friendly smile, spreading his arms wide. "More precisely—we want to help you engulf this world in your wrath."

That was Madiath's first encounter with the Varda-Vaos and Ecknardt.

Yes, that was the beginning of his struggle.

In his office in the Festa Executive Committee headquarters, Madiath Mesa stared vacantly outside his window at the sky above Asterisk.

Just as it had been long ago, the sky was covered over now with thick, leaden clouds that shrouded the moon and stars. The semifinals would begin tomorrow, but unfortunately, the forecast was for rain—yet again.

No amount of water, however, would be enough to douse the

enthusiasm of the spectators, nor Madiath's seething fury.

This would probably be the last time he ever saw these glittering skyscrapers, he thought.

He would have to leave soon. It wouldn't be long now before Helga and Stjarnagarm arrived.

He was a little surprised to find he felt no emotion at leaving this room—his workplace of so many years—or even at bidding farewell to his role as executive chairman.

In the end, Madiath Mesa hadn't changed in the slightest since that day so long ago.

That sentimental, stupid day.

Neither the student council president back then nor the head of the Yachigusa family was still alive. He hadn't taken any direct action against them, but it was he nonetheless who had seen to their demise. As he had expected, it hadn't done anything to make him feel better, but he couldn't just let them go.

"Now then, on to my final task."

He brushed his fingers against the terminal at his desk, opening an air-window.

A formal notice of withdrawal from the tournament and the semifinal match appeared before him.

If he acknowledged it, the first match of the day would have to be canceled.

Which was why he rejected it, sending it back to his subordinates to revise.

There was nothing particularly unusual about this course of action.

It was common enough for the Executive Committee to work to persuade contestants and the schools to do one thing or another whenever something got in the way of the tournament's business interests. Nonetheless, such procedures were time sensitive, and they couldn't force a contestant to do anything against their will.

It was probably futile to try to change his mind like this.

"…We'll just need to take a different approach, then," Madiath said with a soft chuckle as he entered a number into his mobile.

"It's been a while," he began. "I don't suppose I could have a minute of your time?"

CHAPTER 7
THE SEMIFINALS I

"What are you doing here?" Julis asked in a voice so cold and low that it surprised even herself.

Standing in front of her, across the stage, was none other than Ayato.

"Answer me!"

"…Julis." Ayato, however, merely stared back at her pensively.

"Here we go! The last three matches of this unprecedented Lindvolus! And from our four remaining contestants, three not only hail from Seidoukan, but they're all members of the same team that conquered last year's Gryps! It's no exaggeration to say that we've reached a golden age for Seidoukan!"

"Jie Long and Gallardworth have both had long runs of success, so I think we'll all be watching next year to see whether Seidoukan can keep it up."

"And it doesn't end there! As I'm sure everyone already knows, in this first semifinal we've got the Murakumo, Ayato Amagiri, facing off against the Glühen Rose, Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld, joint champions at the last Phoenix! Either one of them could become the second person in history to score a grand slam! It's a shame that one of them will have to end their journey here today!"

"According to my data, these two fought in a duel on Ayato's first day in Asterisk, but it didn't end in a clear result. That happened more than two years ago, so it doesn't really tell us much about this matchup. In general, I would say that Ayato Amagiri has the advantage—"

Neither the live commentary echoing through the stage nor the deafening cheers of the crowds reached Julis.

All of that was completely irrelevant today.

Both her and Ayato's microphones were switched off, so there wasn't any risk of them being overheard.

"I heard that your sister isn't in danger anymore. You shouldn't need to stay in the tournament."

Elliot had already told her he had successfully destroyed the fragment of the Raksha-Nada that had been embedded in Haruka's body. As such, she had firmly believed, right up until the moment when he had stepped out of the gate, that Ayato would forfeit the match.

"I didn't take you for the kind of person who would chase after the glory of a grand slam. And if that's what you want, I don't have any right to blame you… But the least you could do is tell me why you're here."

At Julis's piercing glare, Ayato's expression gradually softened. "So I was right… You were the one who asked him."

"…"

Julis remained silent.

Elliot had agreed not to identify her to Ayato and the others, but Julis had known from the beginning that they would all suspect it was she who had asked him to help Haruka. Given that only a small number of people knew about her situation, that was only natural.

Nonetheless, the real reason why Julis still wouldn't admit to it was her sense of guilt.

She of course wanted to help Haruka, but if Ayato knew for certain that it was she who had helped her, he would undoubtedly feel himself bound by obligation to withdraw from the tournament. For Julis, the thought of him thanking her in that way, even if it was the outcome that she hoped for, was unbearable.

Still, he bowed his head to her with gratitude. "Thank you, Julis. You saved Haruka's life."

That straightforward honesty of his was nothing short of excruciating.

"…Won't you answer me, Ayato?" Julis asked again, without acknowledging his gesture.

Perhaps having finally caught on to her feelings, Ayato's expression went stern once again. "Before that, I want to ask *you* something. Depending on the answer, I don't mind forfeiting here and now."

“What?”

“Julis… Are you really going to try to kill Orphelia Landlufen?”

“!” She winced at those words. “How do you…?” She stopped there before she could reveal too much, but it was too late.

She had practically just admitted to it.

“…You are, aren’t you?” Ayato asked, his voice muted as he stared across the stage at her.

“…Yes.” Seeing no alternative, Julis nodded in confirmation.

If she tried to deceive him, Ayato would no doubt see through her right away. After all, he had been her partner and teammate for more than two years. She couldn’t lie to him.

“In that case, I have to stop you.”

“Even if I’m doing it for something important, something that I can’t give up at any cost?”

“I’ll still have to stop you.”

“…I thought you would say that.”

She understood his motives. She would just have to accept his resolve.

After all, Ayato was that kind of person.

“Tell me who told you, at least.”

“…Last night I got a call from Lamina Mortis.”

“Lamina Mortis…?”

She had no idea what that mysterious figure was planning, but as she had suspected, Orphelia seemed to be involved, caught up in it in one form or another.

Nonetheless, she still had to do what she had to do.

Ayato’s complexion had turned pale. “Julis, if you could just tell me why you’re doing all this, and let me help—”

“Sorry, but I can’t.” Julis shook her head.

She was grateful to him for his infallible kindness, but since Orphelia had asked her and only her, she couldn’t let anyone, not even him, interfere. If she did, she knew the result would be disastrous.

At the very least, if she defeated Ayato here, she wouldn’t have to worry that she had put Haruka’s life in jeopardy. Now, she could fight him with that burden lifted from her shoulders.

She would be the only one to lose someone important.

“If you plan to stop me, then come, Ayato. I’m going all out,” Julis declared, activating her Rect Lux.

“…If that’s how you want to do it,” Ayato responded, activating

his Ser Veresta.

Not a moment later, the signal for the match to start sounded through the arena.

*

The previous night, Eishirou had returned to their shared room just as Ayato was about to go to sleep.

“Ah, what a pain in the neck…”

Eishirou’s tone was as frivolous as ever, but the bags under his eyes and his sunken cheeks made it clear that he was exhausted.

“I haven’t seen you in a while, Eishirou. You look pretty tired.”

“What can I say, Being the prez’s errand boy is tough work. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. And her mom, well, she works you to the bone…” With that, Eishirou flopped facedown onto his bed.

From what Ayato had gathered, Eishirou seemed to be investigating the Golden Bough Alliance not as a member of Shadowstar but working directly under Claudia and Isabella. Not only did his tasks require absolute secrecy, it probably went without saying that it was an added burden on him not being able to rely on the assistance of his Shadowstar colleagues.

“I hear the problem with Haruka has been resolved. That’s one more thing taken care of, huh?”

“Yes, thanks to everyone’s help.”

“Heh, I guess that means you’ll be giving up tomorrow’s match. All those fans looking forward to seeing you face off against the princess will be disappointed, though, huh?” Eishirou broke out into a laugh, his shoulders shaking with amusement at the thought.

“Whatever Julis’s plan is, I can’t get in her way… She’s certainly dead set on it enough.”

“If I had the time and energy, I might look into it for you, but you know…”

“You’ve got your own duties, Eishirou. Don’t worry about me,” Ayato replied. He was grateful, however, for the offer. “Anyway, this will let me focus on the Golden Bough Alliance. I can probably take a bit of the burden off your shoulders, too.”

“Heh, thanks. So I guess you’ve already got permission to drop out, then?”

“That’s… Claudia’s looking after that, but I guess it hasn’t been granted yet.”

Claudia would have contacted him if his request had been accepted. The night was already growing late, though, and he was starting to get worried. From what he gathered, the process was quite complicated.

"Well, it's not like you're too beat up to put up a decent fight, and it's got to be one of the hottest matches. It's only natural that management would drag their heels. Maybe not so much for Sasamiya, though."

Indeed, Saya's arms were both badly injured. She had gone to the hospital immediately after her last match, but it sounded like she could hardly move her right arm at all.

Ayato still hadn't heard whether she would enter her semifinal match tomorrow.

If, assuming the worst, she was to forfeit, there was a possibility that the semifinals would be canceled entirely. The Festa Executive Committee no doubt wanted to avoid that possibility at all costs.

And then, of course, there was the fact that it was Madiath Mesa—who under his disguise as Lamina Mortis had blackmailed Ayato into entering the tournament in the first place—who was the head of the Executive Committee. He couldn't be expected to give up quite so easily.

"Even if they want to hold off, if I just don't go tomorrow, there won't be anything they can do about—"

Before Ayato could finish his sentence, his pillow began to vibrate. His mobile had an incoming call.

The caller was using a private number.

Suspicious, he opened an air-window to answer it and was met by a familiar voice: *"It's been a while. I don't suppose I could have a minute of your time?"*

"…Lamina Mortis!" Ayato cursed to himself.

At this, Eishirou's eyes shot wide open. "Hey, hey, you've gotta be kidding me…!"

"I should congratulate you on making it to the semifinals. Fuyuka Umenokouji was a formidable opponent. It does appear that you've mastered the Ser Veresta."

"…What do you want, Mortis? Or should I say, Madiath Mesa?"

He could hear it clearly now: Mortis's voice, his way of speaking, was identical to Madiath's. It was almost bewildering that he had failed to recognize it for so long.

I guess there mustn't be any mental interference…

Perhaps the Varda-Vaos couldn't use her abilities through the medium of an air-window?

"Hmm? What are you talking about?"

Nonetheless, Lamina Mortis—Madiath Mesa—feigned confusion. He should have known that Ayato wouldn't be under the effect of any mental interference if he called him like this, so the only plausible explanation was that he must have done so intentionally.

"That aside, I have one request. I hear that you want to drop out of your match tomorrow… I want you to reconsider."

"No," Ayato refused outright. "I thought you would have noticed. We've removed the shard of the Raksha-Nada that you left in Haruka's body. You can't threaten us anymore."

"Oh yes. Indeed, you and your sister have caused quite a stir. Thanks to you, my—or rather, Chairman Mesa's program has been thrown into disarray." Madiath paused there, trailing off into a small laugh.

"…Stop messing around."

"No, no, I'm being serious here. After all, you've made it necessary for Chairman Mesa to push forward his disappearance."

"What…?"

Was he planning to escape?

Ayato already knew that Haruka and Helga were on the verge of apprehending him, but if Madiath were to flee now, they would lose everything they had to work from.

Ayato glanced toward Eishirou, who promptly nodded in tacit understanding and headed for the door. Their first priority right now had to be to inform Helga.

"Incidentally… Are you aware of Miss Riessfeld's tragic intentions?"

"Huh…?" Ayato was taken by surprise at this sudden change in topic. "What are you talking about?"

"She means to slay Miss Orphelia on the stage of the Lindvolus."

"What…?"

"Oh, it's a terrible plight! She may escape accusations of foul play if she does it during a match, but just think how deeply it will scar her fragile heart to murder her dear friend! If you call yourself her friend, too, you should put a stop to this appalling act of violence before it's too late." Despite his words, Madiath's tone of voice was mocking.

"…Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"Of course, you can believe whatever you want… But don't you

think you should at least ask her yourself first?"

This was clearly an underhanded move on Madiath's part.

Even if Ayato were to call her now, it was unlikely Julis would answer. He would have to go to the venue in person if he wanted to learn the truth.

"Either way, shouldn't you check with her before you decide to withdraw? If you don't, you'll lose any chance you had of stopping her."

"Ngh…!" Ayato bit his lip in frustration.

As much as he hated admitting it, Madiath was right on that point. At the very least, he couldn't think of any other option that would allow him to drop out.

"…Why is she doing this?"

"Why?"

"She must have a reason. She wouldn't go that far without good cause… And even with one, she would never want that."

"Indeed… I can't tell you the reason, but that's how things stand. It all comes down to Miss Orphelia's mercurial character." Madiath paused for a moment in thought before continuing: *"All I can say is that Miss Orphelia chose her. It was a foolish and, not to say, meaningless act of sentimentalism…but I can relate to that. And I won't deny her the attempt. I don't have the faintest interest in Miss Riessfeld, but when it comes to her purpose now, she and I are two of a kind. As far as she's concerned, she's carrying the whole world on her shoulders."*

Madiath was clearly skirting around the point. He evidently didn't have any intention of answering the question.

But if he was this well-informed, he must know Orphelia pretty well, Ayato deduced. Was she connected to the Golden Bough Alliance in some way?

"Well, then… I'm looking forward to tomorrow's match. Do your best." And with that, Madiath hung up.

Gritting his teeth, Ayato immediately dialed Claudia's number.

He had to cancel his application to withdraw from the tournament at once.

❄

"Lindvolus Semifinals, Match 1—begin!"

As soon as the match got underway, Ayato rushed forward, but Julis quickly deployed her Rect Lux at the midpoint between them.

"Bloom—*Loropetalum!*"

A huge wall of flame erupted from the ground, blocking Ayato's path. It was the same technique she had used to divide the stage during their tag match against Jie Long in the Phoenix.

With a slash of the Ser Veresta, Ayato broke through that flaming barrier almost thirty feet tall—but before he could cross over it, Julis had already deployed her next area ability.

"Bloom—*Gloriosa!*"

Just as he realized that a magic circle had appeared under his

feet, a claw of roiling flame arced to catch him in its grip. It was the kind of multilayered trap ability that Julis specialized in.

Ayato, having anticipated a technique like this, stood still, slashing through that burning claw with the Ser Veresta.

Julis, however, used that time to put considerable distance between the two of them.

Several small wings of flame had emerged from her feet, carrying her swiftly away.

Strelitzia Minor—the same acceleration technique she had used in her match against Xiaohui Wu.

"And we're off to a bang! Just look at that flashy combination of offense and defense! Contestant Amagiri may have made the first move, but Contestant Riessfeld's flame abilities are keeping him at bay! How does this look to you, Zaharoula?"

"Ayato Amagiri naturally wants to engage her in close combat. Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld…well, she's no slouch in close quarters, either, but she isn't at Ayato Amagiri's level. It looks like her right arm is broken as well. That being the case, she probably wants to keep as much distance as possible. Things might be going her way for now, but I wonder how long she can keep it up… They both know each other's strategies and techniques, so I doubt this will have a simple conclusion."

Right. Just as Zaharoula had observed, Ayato knew Julis's skills, but she knew all his. If he hadn't kept his guard up a moment ago, he would have found himself at the mercy of the same kind of long-range bombardment that had characterized Saya's match against Lenaty.

But both he and Julis had grown since they had last fought alongside each other.

Even he was amazed by how much her techniques had evolved when he saw her fight against Xiaohui Wu. If he was going to have any chance at all, he would have to pay particular attention to those poison flames that she'd developed.

And at the same time, she was no doubt watching out for his new tricks.

"Let's go, Ser Veresta."

The Orga Lux trembled as if answering his call before floating free from his hand.

Then it took off, carving ferociously through the air toward Julis.

"Tch…!"

Julis deactivated her Rect Lux, only barely managing to dodge the blow. She understood that if the Orga Lux had scored a direct hit, it would have burned clean through her weapon.

"Here it is! Contestant Amagiri's long-distance control over his Orga Lux from his last match! Contestant Riessfeld doesn't seem to be able to defend against it!"

"Ayato Amagiri has a huge advantage, being able to use his Amagiri Shinmei style techniques at a distance. But it looks to me like they're not as effective as when he uses them himself."

She had done it again and again throughout the tournament, but Zaharoula's keen discernment never failed to leave Ayato perplexed.

Indeed, he might have been able to freely move the Ser Veresta at range, but there was no denying that its speed and accuracy took a hit compared to when he wielded it in hand. After all, one's swordsmanship was essentially built on a mastery over one's own body through long training.

Nonetheless, Julis, he suspected, wouldn't be able to keep dodging it for long.

And yet, she was doing precisely that—managing to escape from the Ser Veresta's every blow seemingly at the last opportunity.

Ayato suspected there were two reasons for that.

The first was that her reaction speed was above and beyond what it had been before. She must have put herself through an arduous training regimen to develop so far so quickly.

And the second—

"An illusion? Impressive, Riessfeld."

Once again, Zaharoula was quick to realize the distinctive way in which Julis was moving, her figure almost flickering.

It was probably the same technique that Xiaohui Wu had used. That would explain why his blows never managed to reach her. Normally, however, such visual tricks wouldn't have been enough to fool him, as the Amagiri Shinmei style's perception-expanding technique of *shiki* would have seen right through it.

Julis, however, was putting a lot more into the deception than most people would. The state of *shiki* made use of all five senses, including sight, sound, and smell, along with detecting minute movements in the air and atmosphere, but Julis's illusion was working on all those levels.

Even so, he should have been able to pinpoint her if he could

increase the precision of his enhanced senses, but to do that, he would have to get closer—if he did that, though, there would be no need to rely on long-range attacks.

"Don't underestimate me, Ayato! Burst into bloom—*Primrose Multiflos!*"

With a downward swing of the Nova Spina, Julis unleashed several dozen fireballs at him.

"Guh…!"

It wasn't possible to avoid this many of them.

Ayato focused his prana into his fists in the same way as Jie Long's martial artists, catching those projectiles with his bare hands.

The power of the fireballs exploding on impact was simply incomparable to what he remembered. But even so, it wasn't too much for his heightened defenses to withstand. Protecting only his school crest, he guarded against and intercepted one blow, then another.

"You're not taking much damage, huh…? First, Xiaohui Wu, then you—I just can't catch a break…!"

"That was strong enough, believe me," Ayato replied as he caught the Ser Veresta, returning to a defensive stance.

Technically, he couldn't say he had escaped without damage. The shock of the repeated impacts had been intense, and his skin was burned in places.

He would have been able to disperse most of those fireballs with the Ser Veresta if he hadn't cast it across the stage. He would have to keep it close if he wanted to avoid the same kind of attack again.

"Contestant Amagiri has recalled the Ser Veresta!"

"It's a risky move, but the Ser Veresta is better tuned for defense rather than offense against Stregas and Dantes. If its user has Ayato Amagiri's skill, that is."

That may have been so, and yet…

He wanted to settle the match as quickly as possible—not because he thought Julis was an easy opponent but precisely because he thought so highly of her skills and abilities. While luck may also have played a part in it, the fact that she had prevailed against Xiaohui Wu, whose raw prowess undoubtedly surpassed her own, was proof of the potential of her keen sense of tactics and her diverse set of abilities. If Ayato let the match get drawn out too

long, she would no doubt end up ensnaring him in a similar trap. On the other hand, haste had its own risks. If he wasn't careful, she would trip him up when he least expected it.

That being the case, he didn't have many options.

"…I guess it can't be helped," he sighed, resigned.

As much as it would hurt Julis, he had to fight to win.

"Hmm…?" It seemed she had instantly noticed his change in stance. Staring back at him with suspicion, Julis stepped forward, bringing down the Nova Spina once more.

"Burst into bloom—*Amaryllis!*"

It was her most well-known move and highly effective.

"Bloom!"

She channeled her mana and prana through the fixed junction pattern of her Rect Lux, amplifying the blast as it sped toward him.

Nonetheless, Ayato cut straight through that huge petal of fire with a single, perfectly timed slash.

"…Hrng!"

Julis frowned in disbelief, but quickly sped across the stage with the help of her *Strelitzia Minor* to move into her next technique.

"Burst into bloom—*Livingston Daisy!*"

A dozen disks of roiling flame swooped down all at once, but Ayato cut through them all with a brilliant flash of the Ser Veresta.

"Guh—!"

At the same time, Ayato slowly began to approach his opponent, closing the distance to her one step at a time.

He couldn't afford to rush. Whenever Julis attacked, he would meet the strike with the Ser Veresta and proceed slowly but steadily forward, always keeping an eye open for traps or other abilities as he narrowed the range in which she could operate.

In short, it was a straightforward frontal attack.

No matter how powerful her techniques, Strega abilities simply couldn't surpass the innate power of an Orga Lux in raw potential. And as long as he kept his wits about him, his reaction time was more than enough to evade any traps she might set.

Whatever strategies she took, they wouldn't pose a significant threat if he could just carefully take stock of them one by one.

To be honest, it was a rather boring tactic but nonetheless sound.

"Ayato…! How about this, then…?!" Julis gritted her teeth,

repositioning the Nova Spina.

The mana in the air around her began to ripple as a flaming vortex began to manifest around her.

"Burst into bloom—*Bequaertii!*"

The burning whirlpool contracted, compressing into a child-size figure.

In total, six puppetlike figures were born from the flames.

"Go!"

With that order, the puppets launched directly at him.

They were fast. Ayato's eyes opened wide in shock.

Their movements were elegant and precise, like the steps of a dance, but they didn't seem to be particularly developed in technique.

"Heh, I based this move on your match against Fuyuka Umenokouji!" Julis declared.

"What…?"

In other words, she had created it from scratch in the span of a single day.

Ayato couldn't help but be impressed.

He brought the Ser Veresta around, moving to sweep them aside, but the fiery puppets deftly slid out of the way.

"Oops…"

One of them, moving toward him to take advantage of the opening that his missed strike had produced, slammed into him with all the force of a punch by one of Jie Long's martial artists.

He took a step back to draw away, but the puppets flowed after him in pursuit. This new technique was more impressive than he had first assumed.

"I thought it was a clever idea, what Fuyuka Umenokouji did, creating something stronger than herself to fight for her. I might not be able to put together a *shikigami* like Gigoku in the span of a single day and night, but these puppets are better close-range fighters than I am, don't you think?"

"…I see."

Ayato had to admit, the puppets were certainly strong in and of themselves, but they weren't possessed of free will as Fuyuka's *shikigami* had been. These creatures were merely imitating certain moves and techniques, although they were clearly modeled on a very proficient fighter.

Nonetheless—

“Amagiri Shinmei Sword Style, Hidden Technique—*Tearaway!*”

With a powerful diagonal slice, Ayato carved the first figure to leap within range from shoulder to hip. As he swung around, he destroyed the next one—and moving sideways to avoid a kick from behind, he countered the next. Spinning around, he beheaded the next two coming his way before plunging his blade directly into the abdomen of the final figure.

That made all six of them.

“Ugh…!” Julis fell back a step, her expression one of disbelief.

The true value of the Amagiri Shinmei style was in melee combat, when one fighter found themselves confronting countless enemies. So long as he remained calm, he wouldn’t fall behind a group of puppets lacking in free will.

“It—it’s not over…!”

Julis continued to unleash one technique after another. Swords of flame, lances of fire, waves of heat, fireballs, burning birdlike apparitions, and countless molten projectiles came flying toward him, but Ayato avoided each and every one of them. Against such techniques, the Ser Veresta was nothing short of overwhelming.

Such a futile stream of abilities could hardly continue forever.

“Burst into bloom—*Antirrhinum Majus!*”

Ayato swung the Ser Veresta downward, mercilessly dissecting Julis’s fiery dragon clean in two.

Finally, he had her cornered at the edge of the stage.

“A-amazing! What strength! Contestant Amagiri just keeps cutting through everything Contestant Riessfeld throws at him!”

“That’s the Ser Veresta for you, but that isn’t the whole story. Only Riessfeld’s most powerful techniques hold a chance of damaging Amagiri, but those moves are easy for him to read and counter. But if she tries to use nimbler, less wide-ranging attacks, they don’t hold much chance of breaking through his defenses. I’ve got to say, she’s in a tough place.”

Julis, her back to the protective barrier encasing the stage, glared toward Ayato, her breathing ragged. “Seriously… You’ve chosen a nasty way to break my heart, Ayato.”

“…Sorry,” he apologized.

“I guess it can’t be helped. This is what I get for taking a reckless, straightforward strategy against you. You’re obviously stronger than I am… I suppose if Xiaohui Wu hadn’t been savoring the fight, that match would have ended this way, too.”

Ayato was only half a step away now.

Nonetheless, Julis hadn't given up. That glimmer in her eyes told him she would keep going until the very last.

Whatever he did, he couldn't rush this.

Having gotten this far, he couldn't blow the whole thing by throwing caution to the wind now.

"I always knew it… But it's still so frustrating." Julis paused, biting her lip so hard she drew blood.

"If…if this was just a normal semifinal match or a duel, I would have fought differently," Ayato admitted.

"A duel, huh…? Heh, I miss those good old days. It feels like so long ago now, back when you transferred here." Her voice was small, lonely.

"Julis, let me ask you again. Why are you doing this? You must have a good reason…"

"You're stubborn. I told you, I can't answer that question. Even if you knew, there's nothing *you* could do."

"…I can beat Erenshkigal," Ayato replied flatly.

Orphelia was certainly powerful—easily the strongest fighter in the tournament, judging from the matches so far. But even so, Ayato had the Ser Veresta. He hadn't fully realized it back when he encountered her in Lieseltania, but with the Orga Lux, he would be able to cut through her poisons and miasma.

"You could. You're stronger than me, and you've got the Ser Veresta. You *could* beat her."

"In that case—"

"But that isn't enough. Just winning isn't enough." Julis's eyes gleamed precariously, filled to the brim with desperation and determination.

Ayato once again sensed the weight of whatever she was bearing.

But even so, he couldn't let her go through with it.

He understood how much his friend cared about Orphelia, how important she was to Julis. But no matter what her reason, if she were to do that to someone she cared so much about, it would be too much for her heart to endure.

"If you really, really need it, let me—"

"…What?" At that moment, Julis's glare turned indignant. "What are you trying to say?" Her rage, her fury, was stronger now than Ayato had ever seen before. "Don't you… Don't you even dare!

How could you?! You—how could…?!" Tears began to spill from Julis's eyes.

"Julis…"

"Yes, Orphelia is my friend! She's irreplaceable! I'd rather die than hurt her! But don't you understand, Ayato?! You are, too! You're just as important to me!" Julis howled, tears running down her cheeks, her expression tinged with raw anger. "You've got to understand, Ayato! I—I love you…! And I couldn't let my *dearest* friend take the life of my *best* friend…!"

It was a desperate plea, wrung out from Julis's bare heart.

Ayato couldn't help but feel ashamed by everything he had said.

"…I'm sorry, Julis," he apologized again.

Julis wiped at her tears with her arm before directing her bloodred gaze back toward him. "No, it's unforgivable. But you've opened my eyes. It was foolish of me to think I could hold back against you."

Julis broke into a dauntless smile as she deployed her Rect Lux around her.

At the same instant, the mana around her began to writhe and blur.

"!"

Sensing a sudden and unfamiliar tension, Ayato leaped backward to put some distance between himself and her.

This feeling… What's going on…?

"If I lose here, it will all be over. So I'll put everything I've got into this. Even if I exhaust all my power today, I'll finish what I have to!"

As Julis spoke, countless pale-blue flames had begun to emanate from around her.

Behind her, a great flower was unfurling, its petals like pure white wings.

"Watch this, Ayato. For the twelve seconds until this blossom withers—*I* am the strongest fighter in the world."

With that declaration, the flower behind her burst into bloom.

"Bloom—*Moonlit Beauty!*"

And with that, Julis disappeared.

"!"

Strictly speaking, she hadn't disappeared. Ayato's eyes simply couldn't locate her.

In a split second, she leaped into his range, using the arm he had thought was broken and striking out with the flat of her hand, leaving him no time to evade or defend.

The impact threw him backward across the stage. Somehow, the blow was even more powerful than Gigoku after merging with all its fellow *shikigami*.

"Guh…!"

By the time he had risen to his feet, Julis, her posture and bearing vaguely aloof, was pointing the end of the Nova Spina right at him.

"Burst into bloom—*Amaryllis!*"

An unbelievably large mass of mana began to writhe and squirm, with a huge pale-blue fireball appearing before her. The scale was completely incomparable to what had come earlier.

"Tch…!"

Ayato sliced through the gigantic ball of flame with a decisive stroke of the Ser Veresta but was immediately enveloped in a tremendous explosion. This time, the force of the blast hurled him hard onto the ground.

Frankly speaking, he had no idea what had just happened.

This new technique—this *Moonlit Beauty*—seemed to enhance Julis's strength, skills, and abilities. But such techniques weren't particularly unusual. Sylvia and plenty of other Stregas could perform similar feats, but they only tended to boost their capabilities by around 50 percent at best. Even Fuyuka's amalgamation technique with her *shikigami* had only roughly doubled her overall strength. What Julis had done, however, was off the charts.

Not only that, she had strengthened both her physical performance and her Strega abilities, too. That boosted *Amaryllis* alone had to be at least ten times what she could normally pull off.

At first, it looked as if her whole body was burning in a pale-blue light. Her skin, her hair, even her uniform had all merged into the flames. The white flower at her back was already half wilted.

If he took her at her word, this would only last twelve seconds.

But was there anyone capable of surviving against her for that long as she was now?

"It's over, Ayato," she said, raising the Nova Spina into the air. "Burst into bloom—*Amaryllis Multiflos!*"

Eight fireballs, all the same magnitude as the last one, appeared around him.

“That’s… Uh-oh…,” Ayato murmured as he braced himself with the Ser Veresta.

And then—

“Ayato Amagiri—crest broken.”

“End of battle! Winner: Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!”

EPILOGUE

“Ah, um, good work…!”

“Well done, Ayato. I’m sorry it ended that way.”

“Hey, Ayato.”

When he returned to his prep room, Kirin, Claudia, and Saya, who would soon be leaving for her own upcoming match, greeted him with sympathetic smiles. In particular, Saya, having decided to keep going against everyone’s expectations, should have been busy preparing in her own prep room but had evidently come to console him regardless.

“…No, it was a complete defeat,” Ayato answered, forcing himself to smile back.

His uniform was scorched here and there, and he had a few light burns, but he had sustained no major injuries. That was practically a miracle given the size of Julis’s last barrage of fireballs, even if he had managed to evade most of the direct hits.

“Well, Julis’s last move was incredible,” Claudia said. “Don’t blame yourself.”

“R-right! Even I could hardly keep track of her movements…,” added Kirin.

“So even you couldn’t catch her,” Ayato murmured. “I guess she was telling the truth…”

He sank into the sofa, finally having a chance to catch his breath. Claudia handed him a glass of water. The cool, refreshing liquid slowly calmed his overheated body and mind.

“The truth about what?”

“Ah… That her new technique would make her the strongest fighter in the world for those twelve seconds.”

Having experienced it firsthand, Ayato had no doubt that was the truth.

If anyone could compete against her in that state, it would have to be Xinglou, Orphelia, or perhaps Helga, but even then…

"Twelve seconds… I see. So there's a time limit." Kirin nodded in understanding.

"This makes it all the more unfortunate that we don't have her as an ally right now… With that power, we might have been able to stand up to Madiath and the Varda-Vaos," Claudia said with a regretful sigh.

"Julis *is* our ally," Ayato corrected her. "She just has something that she needs to do herself right now."

"Oh dear, my apologies. That was rude of me," Claudia replied, sticking out her tongue playfully.

"But… If you're saying that, I take it Madiath escaped?" Ayato murmured.

At this, Claudia's and Kirin's expressions clouded over.

"Indeed. Commander Helga and Haruka raided the Executive Committee offices this morning, but he was already gone. No one seems to know where he went."

"This morning?"

Ayato had asked Eishirou to contact Stjarnagarm about Madiath last night. The city guard operated twenty-four hours a day, so they should have been able to move faster than that.

Claudia flashed him a bitter smile at this unasked question.

"Unfortunately, Galaxy didn't give them permission to act. *Their* top priority is securing the Varda-Vaos. Madiath is really just collateral as far as they're concerned. I suspect they want to let him keep swimming until they locate her, too, and then reel them in together."

"That's…"

"Well, Commander Helga grew tired and forced their hand. But still…I don't think it would be any different if they had gone there last night."

That was probably true.

If it hadn't been, Madiath wouldn't have risked contacting Ayato directly.

"Anyway, what we should be worried about is Orphelia Landlufen's involvement with the Golden Bough Alliance," Saya said with a snort.

Given that she was about to face off against Orphelia shortly, her concern was understandable.

“But we don’t have any evidence of that,” Ayato pointed out. He had simply guessed as much from Madiath’s conversation.

“B-but still, it isn’t hard to believe, right…? I mean, Le Wolfe’s student council president is already in pretty deep with the Golden Bough Alliance…”

As Kirin said, they already knew that Dirk Eberwein, Le Wolfe Black Institute’s student council president, was a member of the Golden Bough Alliance. Given that Dirk had personally recruited Orphelia for Le Wolfe and had used her to consolidate his position as student council president, it was highly likely they both belonged to the same organization.

“My mother is looking into that. In any event, we can be sure of four members: Madiath Mesa, Festa Executive Committee chairman, also going by the guise of Lamina Mortis; Dirk Eberwein, Le Wolfe Black Institute’s student council president; the Orga Lux Varda-Vaos, having usurped the body of Ursula Svend; and Percival Gardner of Saint Gallardworth Academy.”

“And Ernesta Kühne is definitely working with them, too,” Saya said, raising her bandaged right hand and wincing in pain.

“That’s just your hunch for now, though, no? We don’t have any firm evidence. But of course, we’ll take it into account.”

“A-and there’s Orphelia Landlufen, too, right…?”

Even leaving out the last two, they were dealing with powerful and influential figures.

“In any event, we’ll continue searching for Madiath. We’re approaching this problem from several angles—” Claudia stopped there as an air-window popped open to announce a visitor.

The face projected there was that of—

“Julis…?!”

Ayato hurried to open the door, finding the opponent who had so soundly defeated him just a short while ago standing before him.

“Ah, you’re all here, too, then. It’s been a while, I know…”

Julis was clearly exhausted, but she nonetheless showed them all a brave smile. When she tried to enter the room, however, she soon stumbled, almost falling to the ground.

“Julis!” Kirin cried out, leaping to support her.

“Phew… Sorry, Kirin.”

“N-not at all…” Kirin lent her a shoulder as she guided her to the sofa.

Julis sat down, breathing a deep sigh.

“My… You don’t look like the proud victor, Julis.”

“I don’t need to hear that, Claudia. This is the best I can do right now.” Julis’s voice was clearly tired, but it sounded like some of her usual cheerfulness had returned.

Perhaps, Ayato suspected, one of her burdens had lifted now that their match was over. Tomorrow would be the main event, he knew, but he could understand how she felt.

“Shouldn’t you be in the middle of your winner’s interview, though?”

“Oh. I canceled it,” Julis replied with a casual wave. “I mean, look at me.”

“That last technique must have taken a lot out of you…”

“…The *Moonlit Beauty* pushes my physical and mental strength and my prana to their absolute limits. I’m lucky I didn’t completely deplete my prana.”

“A-are you going to be okay tomorrow, in that condition…?” Kirin asked hesitatingly.

“Of course,” Julis responded brusquely, glancing across at her.

“Dear me… In that case, you should go and get some rest. Why did you rush here?” Claudia asked.

At this, Julis averted her gaze, her expression troubled. “That’s…” Scratching at her head, she glanced toward Ayato. “I just wanted to say I know you were worried about me, in your own way. And there’s something I have to say to you.”

“To me?” Ayato asked.

“You were right, I intend to take Orphelia’s life tomorrow.”

“Huh?!”

“What…?!”

“…!”

This was the first the other three had heard of her intentions, so it was no surprise they were taken aback.

“But just so you know—I’m prepared to do it; that’s all. I’m not going to give up. I’ll try to convince her to stop right up to the very end. So please…don’t worry about me.” She paused there, turning away.

“Julis…”

Ayato found himself struck again by a sense of shame.

Julis was strong.

He was sure that she would find the best solution by herself.

What he had to do now was believe in her.

"…Hmph. By the way," Saya began with a sharp glare. "I've got a lot riding on beating Erenshkigal, so why are you all assuming that I'm going to lose?"

"…Ah." This time it was Julis's turn to look embarrassed. "N-no, I, uh, er… I'm not questioning your ability on anything…!"

"Oh?" Saya, her eyes reproachful, came closer.

"I mean, er… To be honest, I didn't think you were up to competing…!" Julis said, glancing down at Saya's arms. "You can't move your arms well, and it looked like most of your Luxes were destroyed in your match against Lenaty. I didn't think you would be able to fix them in a day or two. Then there's how long that huge new Lux takes to deploy, and of course…haven't you already accomplished what you set out to do?"

Saya had entered the Lindvolus in order to settle her score with Rimcy. Rimcy had been defeated by Lenaty, and in the end, it was more like Saya had avenged her former rival. But the point was that she had nonetheless attained her original goal.

"So I didn't think there was any reason for you to fight Orphelia, you see."

"…Hmph, an accurate supposition. That's Julis for you." Saya nodded in apparent satisfaction. "Actually, I *was* going to forfeit the match. I can't beat Erenshkigal like this. But I didn't because there's something I want to try first."

"Something you want to try? Against Orphelia?" Julis asked dubiously.

Saya nodded once more. "Don't worry; it won't get in your way. I'll make sure Erenshkigal makes it to the championship, so make sure *you're* ready."

"…Just what are you going to do?"

"It's a secret."

For a second, it looked like Julis was going to ask again, but she soon gave up and shook her head. "I'll look forward to it, then. I can't even imagine what you're planning."

"Heh-heh."

Julis exchanged a fearless grin with her classmate before standing up from the sofa. "Well, I'll be going, then."

She was still unsteady on her feet, but when Kirin offered to support her, she held out a hand to stop her.

That was probably her pride on show.

Ayato, watching as she headed for the door, called out: "Julis, I

believe in you. You'll win; you'll overcome everything."

"I wonder," was all Julis said in response.

But before she reached the door, she paused for a moment, glancing back. "Ah, right. It got a bit confusing out there on the stage, and so I want to make it clear. What I said, during the match, those are my honest feelings. So"—Julis paused, breaking out into a faint smile—"when this is all over, I want to know how you feel, too, Ayato."

"!"

Ayato's heart skipped a beat at Julis's warm smile.

"…Oh dear, you've got a lot of work on your plate, haven't you, Ayato?" Claudia said with a teasing chuckle.

AFTERWORD

Hello there, Yuu Miyazaki here.

I know it took a while to complete, but I'm glad to have finally been able to get the fifteenth volume of *The Asterisk War* out to you all. There will be spoilers below, so if you haven't finished reading, you've been warned!

I should start with a bit of an apology. Kirin is featured on the cover, but she doesn't appear very much in this volume. I know we could have kept the illustration of her for later or put it somewhere else, but since okiura produced such wonderful artwork, I really wanted to work it in somehow… In the end, that proved difficult, though. The next volume is going to showcase everyone who didn't play a big role this time around, Claudia and the others included, so please look forward to it!

Now then, the Lindvolus has progressed, and we've finally reached the semifinals. Personally, I really enjoyed Saya's match with Lenaty. When I first designed her character, these were the kinds of ridiculously overpowered Luxes I had in mind, so I was really happy to finally be able to show them off.

Ayato and Julis's decisive battle was another event that I had planned from the very beginning of the story. I suppose it's an archetypal narrative arc to have the hero and heroine confront each other, so many readers may have expected this encounter, but even so, as the author, I'm relieved to have finally cleared this turning point.

On the other hand, characters like Elliot have developed beyond what I had originally planned for them. Reading back on what I've written, it seems like bad things keep happening to Elliot one after the other, but I like to think he got some form of

recognition for all his efforts this time.

Orphelia and Sylvia's match begins with a short story that I originally wrote as a bonus packaged alongside the anime release, but I actually really like it. I was careful not to just simply rehash battles for this volume, as I wanted to weave everything together—Ursula's relationship with Sylvia, Julis's relationship with Orphelia, Sylvia's match with Neithnefer, and more—in a way that worked with the main story line.

Since I have a few extra pages for the afterword this time around, let me touch on the match between Ayato and Fuyuka. My concept for her during development was that she would effectively participate as a team during the individual tournament, with her and her teammates each being particularly confident and powerful. I actually wanted to include more scenes to show off her martial arts techniques, but we decided to leave them out.

I'm always worried that in a work with so many characters, there won't be enough pages to give each of them the attention they all deserve or else the story won't keep moving forward. But even so, I love them all and wanted to feature as much of the cast as possible…although I ended up having to tearfully cut the majority of them.

In any event, the next volume will feature the championship match of the Lindvolus and our heroes' full-scale confrontation with the Golden Bough Alliance. The story of Asterisk is finally reaching its climax, so please stick with us until the end.

I'd like to thank okiura for the wonderful illustrations, from the beautiful cover art of Kirin to all the rest. The one depicting Ayato and Julis's battle is especially impressive.

Last but not least, I'd like to acknowledge the great help that I've received from so many people.

To my editor, O, who has shouldered so much extra work; to S, for the continued help working with Fuyuka's Kyoto dialect; to everyone in the editorial department for their help even when I drew so close to my deadlines; to all my proofreaders; and most of all, to the readers who have supported me throughout it all, I would like to express my most heartfelt thanks. I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Yuu Miyazaki
November 2019

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